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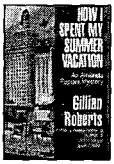

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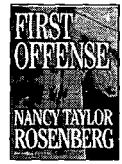

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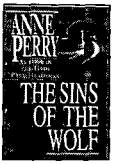

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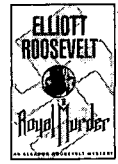

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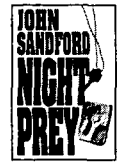

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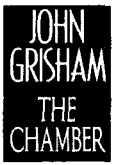

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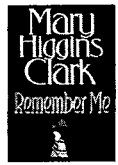

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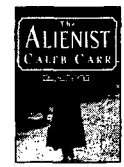

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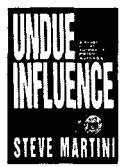

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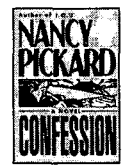

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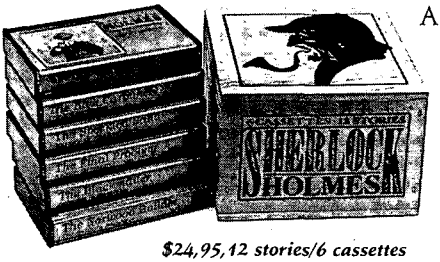

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Each year when the January birthday of Sherlock Holmes comes around EQMM *celebrates along with the Baker Street Irregulars, who hold an annual dinner in the great sleuth's honor, by including in the magazine a story, article, or piece of art that bears a reference to the Sherlock Holmes stories. This year we pay a triple tribute to Holmes and his creator with the Baker Street scene on our cover and two Holmesian stories, the first a new adventure for Edward D. Hoch's Susan Holt and the second a Christmas Holmes pastiche. The Baker Street Irregulars, the oldest Sherlockian organization in the world, was founded in 1934. We are honored to share with them in commemorating the birthday of a truly immortal sleuth, who, according to the Baker Street Irregulars, continues to enjoy his retirement at the age of one hundred and forty-one . . .*

A PARCEL OF DEERSTALKERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

For Susan Holt, it all began the morning her assistant Emmy Spring gasped and fainted in the outer office. Susan heard the thump of her body hitting the floor and came running, along with a half a dozen others in Mayfield's promotions department. Emmy was a dark-haired young woman in her mid-twenties, pretty in a delicate way, who'd been working there about a year. She had a desk in the outer office, and Susan saw at once that she'd been opening the morning mail.

While the others crowded around the fallen young woman, trying to revive her, Susan glanced at the open parcel, about the size of a breadbox. She was not particularly surprised to see that it was filled with deerstalker hunting caps with their visors in front and back. The Sherlock Holmes promotion, of course. They'd been expecting

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the parcel for a week. What they hadn't been expecting was the small, pale object that lay on top of the caps. It was a severed human ear, and when she saw it Susan felt a bit faint herself.

It was Mike Brentnor, who had an answer for everything, who first suggested a Sherlock Holmes story. "It's 'The Cardboard Box,' " he told them. They were seated in Susan Holt's office an hour later, trying to explain it to Detective Sergeant Mulligan of the NYPD. He was one of those types who take copious notes, writing all the time, asking questions without ever looking up at the speakers.

"What about 'The Cardboard Box'? I haven't read Sherlock Holmes since I was a kid with the chicken pox."

"Well, this woman receives two freshly severed ears in a cardboard box. I think her name was Susan in the story. Maybe the ear was meant for you, Susan."

Susan Holt blushed slightly, as Brentnor would have expected. Though they no longer worked in the same office, he never missed an opportunity to chide her, to remind her he was still around even after her rejection of him. "No," she corrected immediately. "The parcel was addressed to Emmy, wasn't it?"

Emmy Spring was quick to agree, having recovered from her fright. "I was expecting it. When I was in Meiringen last month I arranged to have a dozen of the Sherlock Holmes caps sent to us for promotional purposes. We planned to use them for photographs and displays."

Sergeant Mulligan glanced up briefly from his notebook. "You're promoting Sherlock Holmes at Mayfield's?" Somehow the idea of Manhattan's largest department store planning a promotion around a fictional character amused him.

"Why not?" Susan countered. "Holmes has been used in advertising at least since nineteen-oh-four and probably before that. We intend to feature a storewide promotion with Holmes using his magnifying glass to seek out special bargains. I know that's hardly original, but we will supplement it with Holmes memorabilia. Emmy was in Meiringen, Switzerland, last month arranging for us to duplicate the reconstruction of Holmes's cluttered sitting room that they have in the basement of their Sherlock Holmes Museum. We'll also be importing some of the pipes and magnifying glasses and deerstalkers they sell there. It hasn't been decided whether or not we should include the T-shirts and postcards too. That may be a bit tacky for Mayfield's image."

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"The ear is real, Miss Holt. It's not part of any promotion. We'll photograph it and send a copy to the Swiss police along with all relevant data. I suspect they have a body to match it."

"Why would anyone send the ear to us?" Mike Brentnor wanted to know. "Are they warning us not to do the promotion? Are we being threatened by some sort of Sherlockian psychopath?"

"Hardly," Susan answered drily, refusing to be caught up in any hysteria. "I'm sure the Swiss authorities will come up with a very mundane explanation. Perhaps there was an accident in the mailing room." The words lacked conviction even to her own ears, but she wanted Brentnor out of there. Whatever it was, she could handle it better on her own.

Sergeant Mulligan asked a few more questions and then closed his notebook. "Well, if there's a crime, it's out of my jurisdiction anyhow. Let the Swiss handle it."

After he'd gone Brentnor asked Emmy how she felt. "Maybe you should take the rest of the day off."

"I'm all right," the young woman insisted, glancing in Susan's direction. "It was just the shock of opening the lid and seeing that—ear!"

Brentnor drifted away and Susan got down to business. "We've got a lot riding on this promotion, Emmy. I don't have to tell you that. I need to know who you saw in Switzerland, what and who might be behind this thing."

The younger woman smiled. "You don't believe it was an accident in the mailing room?"

"Hardly!"

"Well, I rented a car at Zurich airport and drove down to Meiringen, which is just a short walk from Reichenbach Falls. The place is brimming with Sherlockiana—is that the right word?—centered around the Sherlock Holmes Museum, which is housed in a former Anglican church. The people at the museum were very helpful, especially in allowing us to duplicate their reconstruction of the sitting room. The deerstalker caps are manufactured and sold at a nearby shop by a man named Bernard Wor. I took back samples to show Mike, since he's the buyer for special promotions now. After he agreed to order a few gross I phoned Wor in Switzerland and had him dispatch a dozen deerstalkers for photography and promotional purposes. It might be cute to have some of the salesgirls wearing them too."

"Could the ear have belonged to this man Wor?"

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"I have no idea." Emmy Spring frowned in concentration, as if summoning up his image. "I think he was a larger man, though. That awful ear seemed smaller, more delicate."

Susan nodded. "A woman's ear. Or a child's. Look, Emmy, give me a list of all the people you saw in Meiringen. I have to get on the phone and see what I can learn."

She reached Bernard Wor first, his voice clear and Germanic on the overseas line. "Yes, I sent the parcel of deerstalkers," he quickly agreed. "What is wrong? Are they not satisfactory?" She told him about the human ear and he scoffed. "Surely you must be joking, Miss Holt. They were packed and shipped from this very building."

"Have you had any—" She hated to use the word. "—accidents lately? Could someone have placed that ear in the parcel as a joke?"

"Certainly not!"

"There's a Holmes story where a pair of ears—"

"I know. I have read the entire saga more than once. Be assured, Miss Holt, your ear was no publicity stunt. I knew nothing about it."

"Could I speak with the person who actually wrapped the parcel?"

"Whoever it was, she is gone for the day. You realize it's after five o'clock here."

"Of course. I'm sorry. I just wanted to alert you to the problem. I expect your local police will be contacting you in the morning."

"I will tend to them when they call."

"I hope this won't affect your shipment of the remaining caps. I know our buyer is still quite interested in them."

"I understand. They will be shipped air express within a fortnight."

"Thank you, Mr. Wor."

"How is Miss Emmy Spring?"

"Fine, after the shock of opening that parcel."

"Give her my best wishes, please."

"I'll do that."

Susan hung up and checked off his name on the list. She called the number Emmy had given her for the Sherlock Holmes Museum but got only a recording in four languages listing their hours. She decided the rest of her calls would have to wait until morning.

But by morning it was too late. She walked into her office at 9:30 to find Emmy Spring frantically reporting to Mike Brentnor. "They're talking about canceling everything—your product orders, the promotion, everything!"

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"What's this?" Susan asked, slipping out of the raincoat she'd worn against the threat of leaden spring skies. "What's going on?"

"Rima Fredericks, an Englishwoman at the Sherlock Holmes Museum, just phoned to say they're rethinking their commitments."

Susan cursed silently. "What did Wor give you?"

"I have a letter of intent, not a real contract." She passed over a letter signed by Wor in Meiringen on April fifth.

"We don't need them," Brentnor pointed out. "There are other Holmes sitting rooms we can duplicate. The Sherlock Holmes Pub in London has a nice one. And we can get other caps too."

Susan Holt sighed. "But this is Reichenbach Falls, Mike—the place where Holmes and Moriarty supposedly plunged to their death! We want to be able to say *Direct from Reichenbach Falls* on our displays and merchandise. What's the trouble with them, anyway?"

"Apparently the police have been causing an uproar ever since Mulligan contacted them," Emmy told her.

"Do they have a body to go with the ear?"

"I don't know, but they've managed to frighten the people we're dealing with over there pretty badly."

Susan debated her options, then said suddenly, "I'm flying to Switzerland, Emmy. See if you can get me a reservation on a flight to Zurich overnight. I'll rent a car there."

Mike Brentnor immediately brightened at the prospect. "I'd be happy to come along and help. You might need a man."

She glanced at him distastefully. "No thanks, Mike. Not this time."

"But I could—"

"I'll phone you if I need anything."

She left the office early that afternoon and went home to pack enough clothes for a three-day trip. She hoped it would be shorter than that. Russell was just making breakfast when she reached the apartment. His current off-Broadway play kept him on a crazy schedule that played havoc with their social and love life. By the time he got home most nights, after twelve, she was fast asleep.

"You're not going off again!" he grumbled, his unkempt blond hair catching the afternoon sunlight through the southern window.

"Just for a couple of days. We have an emergency with our Sherlock Holmes promotion."

"Where are you going this time? London?"

"Reichenbach Falls, actually. It's in Switzerland."

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"God, you're crazy! Brentnor going with you again?"

"Hardly! I wouldn't trust him within fifty feet of me outside the office."

He grunted. "Want a piece of toast?"

"Thanks." She wolfed it down, suddenly remembering she hadn't taken time for lunch.

"Does this have to do with the ear?" he asked, remembering what she'd told him the previous night.

"Yes. Apparently it's caused quite an uproar over there."

He bent to lightly kiss her own ear. "Be careful. I want you back intact."

The distance from Zurich to Meiringen was only about fifty miles, although it was much farther over the curving mountain highways. Susan's little rental car was a joy to drive, but it still took her better than two hours to make the trip. Driving into the quaint little town at high noon she suddenly felt as if she had stepped back a full century in time. Men and women wearing Victorian clothes and carrying walking sticks and open parasols strolled along the street in groups.

Susan had chosen to stay in the new Sherlock Holmes Hotel rather than in the nineteenth-century Park Hotel du Sauvage, which served as a model for the hotel where Conan Doyle had Holmes spend his last night. She asked the desk clerk about the people in Victorian dress and he beamed. "We hope it'll become an annual custom on the fourth of May. It's the anniversary of Holmes's plunge into the falls, and a number of Sherlockians dress up to honor the event."

The date had meant nothing to Susan, whose knowledge of the stories was confined to a few of the most popular tales. "This is the fourth of May," she agreed. "Which way is the Sherlock Holmes Museum from here?"

"The old church at the center of town. It's a cream-and-ocher building with a rose window and a tin roof with a turret. You can't miss it. There's a bronze statue of Holmes out front."

She quickly unpacked in a modern hotel room that offered a breathtaking view of the snow-capped mountains. It would be a wonderful place for a relaxing vacation but she was here on business. The museum was easy to find when she stepped out again into the May sunshine. Outside she paused to admire the seated bronze Holmes, by a British sculptor named John Doubleday.

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The first person to greet her inside the remodeled church was Rima Fredericks, the Englishwoman who'd phoned Emmy. "So nice to meet you, Miss Holt. I'm sorry this business caused you to come all the way over here."

She was a woman in her forties, still fairly attractive though she dressed plainly and wore her dark hair in an unbecoming bun. "Are you in charge here?" Susan asked.

"No, no. I'm only an employee. The director of the museum is away at the moment and Mr. Eiger is in charge. He made the decision to cancel the events at your store."

"I guess he's the one I should see."

Rima Fredericks went off to find him, leaving Susan alone among the facsimiles of Conan Doyle manuscripts and other Sherlockian treasures. There was a portrait of Doyle himself, along with an etching of Stoneyhurst, the school he attended. She was just starting to read about it when a gruff Germanic gentleman joined her. "I am Fritz Eiger. I understand you have flown from New York to see me."

She handed him her business card. "Susan Holt from Mayfield's. You and Bernard Wor both indicated your willingness to help us in our promotion. We are planning to construct a duplicate of your Sherlock Holmes sitting room, clearly labeled as being identical with the one here at Reichenbach Falls."

"I'm afraid we can't allow that at the present time." His lips had curved into a sad smile.

"Why not, may I ask?"

"The police are investigating the possibility that a serious crime has been committed. The director would never forgive me for allowing the museum's name to become linked with anything scandalous."

"What crime is that?"

He stared at her through his wire-rimmed glasses. "I believe a human ear was sent to you. As in the story of 'The Cardboard Box,' we can assume it came from a dead body."

"Is anyone missing in the town?"

"I cannot answer for the police."

"Will you reconsider your decision?"

"Not unless this matter is cleared up. It's not just me. Bernard Wor feels the same way, for whatever that's worth."

"I'm on my way to see Mr. Wor next."

"You will find him at the Sherlock Shoppe," he said with some distaste. "Just down the street."

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"I still hope I can change your mind," she said as she departed.

A man and woman in Victorian costume were just leaving the Sherlock Shoppe as she approached. "Fine deerstalkers," the man commented. "The best quality I've seen." He was an American, something that surprised Susan. With those costumes she'd somehow assumed they were all British.

She knew Wor the instant she saw him behind the counter. He exactly fitted Emmy Spring's description of him. His accent was thickly Germanic, as it had been on the phone. Whereas Fritz Eiger had seemed dull and studious, this man looked her over as if he might invite her into bed at any moment. "Miss Holt, all the way from America! You are even more charming in person than on the telephone."

She smiled, deciding to go along with his game. He was fairly handsome, maybe still in his late thirties. "I've come to charm you out of a few gross of deerstalkers, with special Reichenbach Falls labels sewn in."

"The police believe someone has been murdered."

"I know that. If true it's too bad, but commerce must go on. Why would you cancel an order because of a possible murder that doesn't concern you?"

"It may concern the shop. The parcel of deerstalkers was mailed from here."

"You told me on the phone it was packed by one of your women. May I speak with her?"

"That would be Bruni Zandt. She's ill today."

"I would think this is one of your busiest days, with all those Sherlockians about."

"I know. The rest of us have been very busy."

As they spoke, more costumed visitors entered the shop. Bernard Wor's two clerks were both working the cash registers and he went off to summon more help from the workroom out back. When he returned he said apologetically, "I'm sorry, but we must continue this in the morning. We're just too busy today."

"I understand."

In truth Susan was beginning to feel some jet lag after her all-night flight from New York. She'd never been great at sleeping on planes, and this time she hadn't slept at all. She left the Sherlock Shoppe intending to return to her hotel room, but when she saw a group of Victorian-clad tourists heading toward the falls a short

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walk away she decided to join them. It was, after all, the Reichenbach Falls that had inspired Conan Doyle to set his story in this beautiful place. All else had come from that fact.

The falls were an awesome spectacle. They were really a cascade of five consecutive waterfalls, narrow and thundering through a cleft in the Alpine rock. A woman's voice behind Susan spoke into her ear above the roar. "This is the best time of year to see them, when the melting snows from up the mountain make them a real torrent."

She turned and saw that it was the British woman, Rima Fredericks, from the Holmes Museum. "Hello there! I wanted a look at them before I turned in early. Has the museum closed?"

"I was on the early shift today. How long will you be in town?"

"A day or two, depending on how long it takes me to straighten out this business." She put a hand on the railing to steady herself.

"Fritz was a fool to cancel the agreement. It's good publicity for us. I'm sure when the director returns he'll straighten things out."

"Bernard Wor canceled too," she told the woman. "I think he fears one of his employees is involved in this ear business."

"Which one? I often visit them in the workroom."

"He said Bruni Zandt sent the package, but she seems unavailable for questioning."

They'd stepped back from the edge of the falls, the better to converse, and the others had wandered up ahead of them. Some appeared awed to be standing on the ledge where Holmes and Moriarty had engaged in their final struggle. For the first time, Susan became aware of a funicular with a red gondola that ran down the side of the cliff, providing a better view of the falls. "That only operates in the summer," Rima Fredericks said, following her gaze. "But you might be here till then if you're waiting to see Bruni."

"What do you mean?"

"She took off last month. The rumor is she embezzled money from Mr. Wor."

"I wonder why he didn't tell me that."

"He doesn't talk about his business affairs. When he first opened that place some of the residents thought he was cheapening our town. They said a name like Sherlock Shoppe sounded too commercial, too American."

"Your whole town is commercial, in case you haven't noticed it. You've built an industry around Holmes's plunge into the falls."

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The Englishwoman gestured around her. "Obviously it's what the tourists want. They travel here as an homage to Sherlock Holmes and they want to see the memorial tablets, statues, and museum. They want to take back a deerstalker and a magnifying glass as souvenirs."

"I suppose you're right," Susan replied, too tired by now to argue about it. She took one last look over the ledge at the cascading white water and said, "I really have to get some sleep. Jet lag, you know."

"Come by the museum in the morning. I want to help. I still see that poor Emmy opening the box and finding the ear on top of the caps."

Susan promised to be there, remembering she had more questions for Fritz Eiger too. She walked back alone to the Sherlock Holmes Hotel with every intention of going straight to bed. But it was dinnertime and she decided she was hungry. After that, finally in her room, she remembered the time difference and decided to phone Sergeant Mulligan back in New York.

She recognized his voice immediately. "Mulligan here."

"Sergeant, this is Susan Holt from Mayfield's. I'm phoning from Switzerland."

"Doing a little mountain climbing, Miss Holt?"

"I'm trying to keep our promotion plans alive. Your police are apparently a bit heavy-handed over here."

"To the best of my knowledge I have no authority over the Swiss police."

"I'm calling about the ear."

"Have you found a body to go with it?"

"Not yet, but I'm looking. Has your lab examined it?"

"Of course."

"What did they find?"

"It was hacked off, not cleanly removed. We believe it came from an adult woman, but we can't be sure."

"Why a woman?"

"The size, for one thing. And the lobe is pierced for an earring. Of course that's not conclusive. It could be from a man or boy."

"How recent was it?"

"Hard to tell for sure. There's evidence it was preserved in rough salt and possibly frozen for a time. It could be weeks or months old. Of course the whole thing still could be a publicity stunt. The ears in that Holmes story were preserved in salt."

"Yes, but—" she began and then left it hanging.

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"You might suggest the police there check back a bit if they've got no recent killings."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I'll let you know if they find anything here."

"I'm sure they'll advise me, Miss Holt," he answered drily.

After that she slept.

By morning the tourists had put away their Victorian costumes and the crowds had thinned out. Refreshed after a good night's sleep, Susan ate breakfast at the hotel and then went off to see Bernard Wor once again. He smiled as she entered, and came around the counter to greet her. "I am so pleased that you could return, Miss Holt. Yesterday was too busy for a proper conversation. Let me show you around."

His hand rested lightly on her shoulder as he guided her into the workroom at the rear of the shop. She managed to edge casually away and asked, "Do you make the caps back here?"

"We do the final sewing and assembly. Most of the other items, like the magnifying glasses, are purchased at wholesale, though we affix our Sherlock Shoppe sticker to them."

Susan glanced at the mailing table. "Is this where the parcel would have been wrapped for us?"

"Right here," he confirmed.

"How is it possible that a human ear could have been added to the package without anyone noticing?"

He shrugged. "It's a small thing, easily concealed in the hand. Then too, Bruni often works late getting out overseas shipments."

"I was told that Bruni Zandt has been gone for some weeks."

He peered at her and said, without changing expression, "Did I say Bruni? I meant Eva, the woman who took Bruni's place. I haven't gotten used to the change yet."

"Could I speak with Eva?"

"Certainly. She's right over here."

Eva was very young, probably still in her late teens, and she spoke no English. Bernard Wor stood by to translate, but there was no way she could question the girl about the missing Bruni or anything else. She turned back to Wor. "Do you have an office where we could talk?"

He led her up a flight of stairs to the second floor above the Sherlock Shoppe. The office had windows looking down on the workroom and others at the front of the building looking out on the Holmes

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Museum in the old church. Susan gestured out the window and said, "If you were to change your mind and join in our promotion, I believe Mr. Eiger would too. The other shops we need would fall in line as well."

"The police have been here already about the ear," he said.

"The ear's not going to disappear just because you back off on your commitments. In fact, the police might decide you have something to hide."

He seemed to grow pale at her words. "If Eiger goes along with you, I will too," he decided.

"I'm on my way to speak to him now." She took some papers from her big purse and ran over the terms of the agreement again. "I'm authorized to increase our order for deerstalkers by three gross, in assorted sizes, if you sign a contract today."

"See me after you have Eiger's signature."

"I want yours first, to use as a bargaining chip."

"Increase your order by five gross and I'll sign."

"That's more than we can sell."

"Nonsense! You'll sell out in a week with that publicity about the severed ear. I might even suggest including a nice Swiss chocolate ear with each cap. White chocolate, of course, since I understand the ear was white."

She couldn't believe he was serious. "Mayfield's would never do anything like that."

"More's the pity."

Susan gathered up her papers. "Emmy Spring said you could be difficult."

He smiled and said, "Give my regards to Emmy."

As she was leaving the office she noticed some boxes of lethal-looking objects. "What do these axes have to do with Holmes?"

"Nothing. I have a second shop down the street that sells mountain climbing equipment. These are a new type of ice axe. Man cannot live by Sherlock alone, even in Meiringen."

She picked one up and hefted it. "You could kill somebody with one of these. Or tear an ear off."

"Maybe you could. Not me."

She dropped it back in the box. "I'll return when I have Eiger's agreement. Can I at least tell him he can call you?"

"Of course."

She left the Sherlock Shoppe and walked down the street to the museum. There was still a chill in the air, but she couldn't expect

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much better for the first week in May. A few tourists went in just ahead of her and she waited till they cleared the front desk before approaching Rima Fredericks.

"Hello again," the Englishwoman said with a smile.

"Is Mr. Eiger in?"

The dark-haired woman hesitated. "He is, but the police are with him now. Just a moment while I ring his office."

Susan waited with growing apprehension while she spoke a few quiet words into the phone and listened to the response. "You can go in," the woman told her. "They wish to speak with you too."

She took a deep breath and entered the indicated door. Two beefy men in open trench coats sat across the desk from Fritz Eiger. One of them rose and introduced himself in heavily accented English. "I am Captain Altdorf of the Swiss police. You are the American who discovered the severed ear in the parcel of deerstalker caps?"

"I'm Susan Holt. I work at Mayfield's in New York with Emmy Spring, the woman who actually found the ear."

"Ah, yes. But you were present at the time?"

"I was."

"It was a left ear?"

She had to think for an instant. "Yes, the left." The vision of it was still there, unwanted, in her memory.

"A body was found two weeks ago along the banks of the Aar River north of here. It was badly battered and decomposed and we have only now been able to identify it through dental records. It was the body of Bruni Zandt, a young woman employed at the Sherlock Shoppe here in town. She had been missing for about a month. As you may know, the Reichenbach is a tributary of the Aar River. If a body went over the falls here it might come to rest on the banks of the Aar."

"Her ear—"

"The body was missing its left ear. We thought nothing of it at first, because of the condition of the corpse. But when we received the report from the New York police, someone remembered the woman on the riverbank. We retraced her possible route back up to the falls and started checking on missing persons in this area. The dental records identified her."

"But the ear wasn't lost when she went over the falls," Susan insisted. "It would have been more damaged than it was. And it would probably have vanished somewhere in the river, eaten by predators."

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"Exactly, Miss Holt. The existence of the ear tells us two things. Bruni Zandt was murdered, and it was her killer who mailed the ear to your office."

"The parcel came from the Sherlock Shoppe, as you know. Perhaps Mr. Wor can tell you something."

"I have men questioning him at this moment. I am going there myself now. What brings you to Meiringen, Miss Holt?"

She explained about the store's promotion plans and the problems that had arisen. "Some believe that the dead woman fled after embezzling money from Wor's shop," she told them.

"We are aware of that."

"I can't imagine there was very much money involved."

Captain Altdorf smiled. "Mr. Wor has foreign business connections. The amount could have been sizeable."

"I'd like to get to the bottom of this before I return to America."

The stocky man kept smiling, but his tone was icy. "I notice you have the same initials as the great detective, Miss Holt. Do not try to emulate him. We don't want another body going over Reichenbach Falls."

Susan waited until the police finished questioning Wor, then entered the Sherlock Shoppe. She purchased a Holmes-style pipe for Russell and was charging it on her credit card when Bernard Wor came down from his office, looking a bit haggard. "The situation has changed since our talk, Miss Holt."

"I know. Your police have identified Bruni Zandt's body."

He glanced at the sales clerks on duty. "Come up to my office, please."

Once upstairs, he seated himself behind the desk. "How much do you know?"

"Some people think she embezzled money from you, possibly a large amount of money."

"I have various investors in other countries. A large amount of money was delivered to me in cash, in Italian lira. I foolishly thought it could remain in my safe overnight, until I took it to a bank in Zurich the following day."

"This Bruni had the combination?"

"Yes."

"When did it happen?"

"Just a month ago today." He got up and walked over to the windows that looked down on the workroom. "You can see the safe

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from here, under the table at the far end of the room."

"How much money did she take?"

"In your currency, it would be about eighty-five thousand dollars."

"It must be insured."

Bernard Wor smiled sadly. "There is only my word that it was ever here, or that she took it."

"Look, I have to clear up this matter of the store promotion. Can you come with me right now to see Fritz Eiger? Maybe then I can help you with your problem."

Rima Fredericks directed them to the museum basement, where Eiger was busy arranging the various components of the Holmes sitting room. "We have signs telling them not to touch anything, but they do, of course. Sometimes, when no one's on duty down here, they even steal something—Holmes's jackknife that skewers the mail to the mantel, for instance. Boys like to take those. Once one of Dr. Watson's scimitars was missing from between the windows."

Susan gazed at it all, imagining it reproduced on the fourth floor of Mayfield's: the furniture, the Victorian wallpaper, the *Times* of London, the bullet marks in the wall, even teacups and plates on the table. "When was the scimitar taken?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Back in the winter sometime. But we keep extras of everything."

"Look, I've got you both together and I'd like to resolve this business. The police have a body to go with that severed ear now. No one thinks it's a publicity stunt any longer. There'll be money and publicity for both of you if you stick with your original agreements, and I'm sure other local merchants would join in. You'd be putting Meiringen right on Fifth Avenue!"

It took another twenty minutes of discussion, and a slight sweetening of the original terms, but in the end she had them. At least the problem that had brought her there was solved. When she left the museum she went at once to her hotel room and placed a call to the store. Emmy had taken the day off to move to a larger apartment, so she was forced to give the good news to Mike Brentnor.

"They've both signed," she told him. "We're set. I've increased your order for deerstalkers by five gross."

"Five—"

"It was that or nothing. I'm going to meet with the manager of the Sherlock Holmes Hotel before I fly back tomorrow. He might be interested in a tie-in of some sort."

"That's fine. You'll be back tomorrow, then?"

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"My plane's due at JFK at two thirty-five. I should be in the office before four."

After speaking with the hotel manager and a couple of other local merchants, Susan was convinced she'd done all she could for the store's promotion. She stopped back at the museum just as Rima Fredericks was leaving for the day.

"Which way are you going?" Susan asked. "I'll walk with you."

"I live quite close-by, but we can walk up to the falls again if you wish."

"Fine."

The Englishwoman set a good pace, and the usual ten-minute walk to the lower falls was completed in less than that. "You haven't seen the good view from farther up," she told Susan. "The central falls is only fifteen minutes higher and quite impressive."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"It was to Moriarty, but all the ledges have these metal railings. They're quite safe."

"They weren't safe enough for Bruni Zandt."

Rima Fredericks turned sharply to stare at her. "What do you mean? Do the police believe she was killed here?"

All around them the roar of the falls filled the air, making talking difficult. A spray of water dampened their clothes as the wind shifted. "You know she was killed here, Miss Fredericks."

"We're getting wet," she told Susan. "We'd better go back."

"You were often in the workroom at the Sherlock Shoppe. It was easy for you to distract that girl Eva and slip the ear into the parcel of deerstalkers."

"You think I did that?"

"I'm sure of it. You commented earlier on what a shock it must have been for Emmy to open the parcel and find an ear lying on top of the deerstalkers. I doubt if the police supplied the detail that it was on top of the caps rather than under them. You knew it because that's where you placed the ear."

"Why would I—?" She had edged closer to Susan, perhaps to hear better above the roar, but the result was to force her closer to the railing over the falls.

"Don't!" Susan shouted, pushing back, struggling. The wet rocks beneath her feet were slippery and slimy. Her face hit the railing.

They wrestled there, locked in each other's arms, just as Holmes and Moriarty might have struggled more than a century earlier.

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Susan felt herself slip, her right foot going over the edge, as she clung desperately to the railing.

Then suddenly Captain Altdorf was there, yanking the Fredericks woman away, hauling Susan back from the brink. "Thank God!" she gasped. "She's the one. She sent the ear!"

Emmy Spring met her at Kennedy Airport the following afternoon. "What's the bruise?" she asked, horrified at the sight of Susan's face.

"It's a long story. I was wrestling at the edge of Reichenbach Falls, trying to be Sherlock Holmes."

"It's a wonder you weren't killed!"

They went down to the baggage claim while Susan waited for her suitcase to appear. "At least I found out who put the ear in that parcel, and where it came from."

"Tell me!"

"Wait till we get this bag to the car."

"Are you going home or to the store?"

"To the store, briefly. I've been up forever, but I guess I can last for a few more hours."

Once in the car Emmy deluged her with questions about the trip. "So who sent that ear?"

"Rima Fredericks, the Englishwoman who works at the Sherlock Holmes Museum. She phoned you the other day."

"But whose ear was it and why did she send it?"

"It belonged to a young woman named Bruni Zandt who worked in the Sherlock Shoppe."

"I don't believe I met her."

"I think you did, just once—when you killed her, Emmy."

As Sergeant Mulligan told her later, accusing someone of murder while she was driving a car out of Kennedy Airport wasn't the wisest thing Susan ever did. It was lucky that they only ended up off the road in a ditch, with Emmy Spring sobbing out the whole story that Susan had already figured out.

She'd been standing in Bernard Wor's upstairs office, examining that box of ice axes while he stepped out for a moment. Looking down through the windows at the workroom, she noticed a young woman employee make her way to the safe beneath the table at the far end of the room. She was furtive about it, glancing over her shoulder to make certain the workroom remained empty. But as she

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unlocked the safe and removed a thick white envelope from it, she never thought to look up at Wor's office windows. Emmy didn't even know the young woman, but she realized she was witnessing a crime. She didn't wait for Wor to return. She ran down the steps after the fleeing woman, still clutching an ice axe in her hand.

Outside it was almost dark—the first week in April—and still chillingly cold. Perhaps sensing she was being followed, Bruni Zandt ran up toward the falls. Emmy caught up with her at the first overlook. They struggled, Bruni pushed her, and Emmy swung the ice axe with all her might. It took off Bruni's left ear with a horrible spurt of blood. Terrified by what she had done, Emmy grabbed the wounded woman's purse and shoved her over the railing to the falls.

She claimed she still planned to report it to the police, but when she opened the envelope and saw a small fortune in Italian lira she changed her mind. The deed was done. She could not bring this unknown woman back to life. The money had not been hers, and it had already been stolen from Bernard Wor. It was as much Emmy's as anyone's. That was the story she told Susan by the side of the road as they waited for the police, and that was the story she would tell the Swiss courts later when they extradited her and tried her for murder.

"How did you ever tumble to such a thing?" Sergeant Mulligan asked Susan the following morning, as she made her statement in his office downtown.

"First it was the ear. I asked myself why it had been sent. Was it a tasteless publicity stunt suggested by Doyle's story 'The Cardboard Box'? I doubted it, because there were two ears in that story. Why not two ears here, if that was the sender's purpose? Obtained from a medical school, two would be as easy as one. No, the ear was sent for a different reason entirely. It was sent as an act of blackmail, undeniable proof that a dark deed had been witnessed. The parcel of deerstalker caps was addressed not to the store, nor to me, remember, but to Emmy Spring, who'd been over there just a month earlier."

At first Mulligan needed convincing. "You need more than that to tie her to the killing. Was she over there at the right time?"

"At exactly the right time. Even before her confession and the statement from Rima Fredericks, I could place her in Wor's upper office, with a perfect view of the safe, on the day of the robbery. She brought back with her a letter of agreement, signed by Wor on April fifth. I arrived there on May fourth, the Holmes anniversary, and

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the following day Wor told me the embezzlement occurred exactly one month earlier—April fifth, the very date Emmy got his signature on the letter. He discussed all business matters in his office and certainly the letter would have been signed there. Add to that the presence of those ice axes as a possible weapon—"

"You mentioned a missing scimitar from the Holmes sitting room."

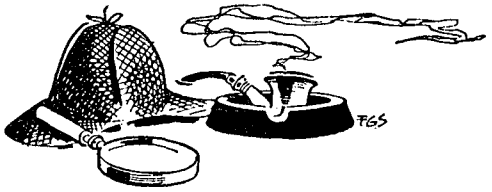
"A scimitar would have made a cleaner cut, not the hacked-off wound you reported to me. The pointed ice axe seemed a much more likely weapon. And is there any evidence that Emmy Spring might have smuggled that stolen money back into this country? In a way, there is. She just moved into a larger apartment, which in New York almost certainly means a more expensive apartment." She took a deep breath. "I placed her at the scene, with an available weapon, and evidence of a recent improvement in her finances. We had the human ear addressed to her, and the highly emotional reaction it brought. When it turned out the ear came from a woman killed a month ago, I just couldn't overlook the possibility of Emmy's involvement. When I learned the Fredericks woman sometimes visited the Sherlock Shoppe workroom, it seemed likely she saw the crime and was blackmailing Emmy, sending the ear as proof of what she knew. She might even have demanded the money when she phoned Emmy about the possible cancellation. She'd been above Emmy and Bruni Zandt on one of the ledges that evening and saw the whole thing. She retrieved the severed ear after Emmy fled the scene and kept it in her freezer."

"Where did this money come from in the first place?"

Susan shrugged. "Somewhere in Italy. Perhaps it was Italian Mafia money, on its roundabout way to a Swiss numbered account."

Sergeant Mulligan smiled. "Sherlock Holmes would have been proud of you."

"I thought of him when I was struggling on that ledge. But I knew I wouldn't die because he didn't, did he?"



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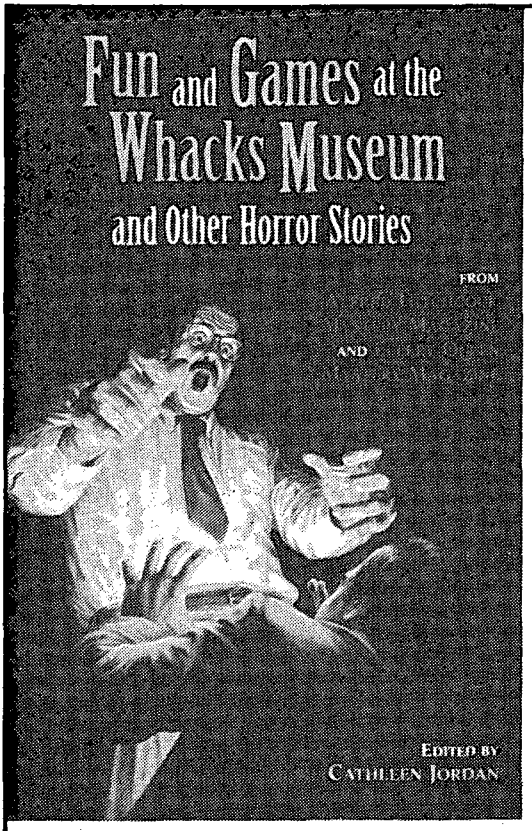

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a *NEW* short story by

RALPH McINERNY

Ralph McInerny is often on the road, but always in the company of his laptop computer. The following story was written during a sojourn in Italy, during which the peripatetic author made stops in Sicily, Rome, and the Amalfi Coast . . .

PARADISE

by RALPH McINERNY

Their traveling ended the day Martha fell into the Grand Canyon. They had spent the morning in the Petrified Forest, which Martha had found a great disappointment, and then, after a tasteless lunch in one of those franchises that seemed designed to make travel pointless, they went on, without a nap—Martha said he could nap at home, the point of this trip was to see things—to the Grand Canyon.

Everyone was very considerate to Richard afterward. The state police brought in a helicopter, grounding the commercial See-the-Canyon-from-the-Air choppers, and brought Martha's body up from the floor of the canyon far below. A trooper advised Richard not to look at the body, but he did. After all these years, her voice was finally stilled.

"It's the damndest thing I ever heard of," said Ned Doutel when he guided Richard through the intricacies of becoming a widower.

"You mean all these regulations?"

"I mean a woman falling into the Grand Canyon."

"One of the troopers told me he's surprised there isn't more of it. They worry even more about suicides."

"But you and Martha had been everywhere. She wasn't some green tourist."

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They had been famous among their friends for their travels, even before Richard retired. Martha was forever planning another trip. They didn't take pictures, they didn't show slides or movies of their travels. One or two postcards was as far as Martha went. For the rest, she was content with her memory and her ability to re-create in words what they had seen.

"Venice? If you want a touch of Venice, drive past the water treatment plant. The canals smell like sewers and the buildings are rotting away."

The Bridge of Sighs? Nice, but not something you'd go halfway around the world to see. St. Mark's was ill-lit and smelled of stale incense, but at least that cut the smell from the lagoon. And don't get her started on the people kissing the toes of statues, lighting little electric lamps, and mumbling away.

"I don't think I'll ever travel again," he told Doutel.

"You'll miss it."

"It wouldn't be the same."

"God knows you can afford it. You're worth twice as much as you were."

Even so, the lawyer seriously proposed that Richard sue the state of Arizona. He was certain there were millions in it. The story had been run all around the country, around the world, it was a sensation. By God, that canyon was an attractive hazard.

"It's not my sort of thing, of course. You'd want one of the celebrity guys who does this sort of thing as a rule. Let him take his cut, you'd still get millions. How many men have had a wife fall into the Grand Canyon?"

"I don't know," Richard said, genuinely curious.

"It doesn't matter."

"I wouldn't want to profit from Martha's death."

"Think of all those fat cats retired down in Scottsdale. Talk about greed. You should make them pay."

Richard said he wouldn't do that and he didn't think he'd travel again.

Travel had always been Martha's idea. He would have been content to remain at home, putter around in his workshop in the garage, paint this, repair that.

"You can do those things when we get back," Martha would say. "You can always do things like that. Let's travel while we can."

She enjoyed not enjoying travel. Faraway places had to be seen to know that they really weren't much. Paris was dirty, Milan never

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saw the sun, Spain was religious, Buenos Aires was a fourth-world city.

"Richard twisted his ankle just walking down the street. The sidewalks are a mess, broken, crumbling, a menace."

Richard had loved Buenos Aires as later he loved the Petrified Forest. He could have spent the day there.

"Is this all it is?" Martha asked in disbelief. She looked around at the other tourists wandering about. "It's like a cemetery, you know, and these are memorial stones."

At the canyon she had complained that you couldn't see anything.

"We could take a flight through it."

She shivered. "But that's the way it looks from here. It's like seeing something out of a plane window."

And she leaned way out and over as she spoke.

At first people worried about him and he was invited out a lot, but then that tapered off. He heard it said that he was adjusting very well. He worked at his bench, staying up half the night if he felt like it, and when he got up he ate what he wanted for breakfast. He got rid of all the yogurt and oatmeal packets and imitation eggs and turkey-bacon Martha had put him on. Once more he ate real bacon and scrambled eggs.

A year went by before he realized he was lonely. He wished people would ask him over, but it was awkward with just himself; they had to ask others and it was always uneven.

"He'll never forget Martha," they said.

Sometimes at night he would wake up to the sound of her voice, her returned traveler's voice, and he wanted to say, but I liked Venice, I liked Milan, I liked all those places. I loved the Petrified Forest but you looked at one of the wonders of the natural world and said it wasn't much. . . .

He stopped in at a travel agency and talked about a trip. It was not a serious visit, or so he had thought, but the more the agent talked the more he found himself responding.

"You fly into Fiumicino and pick up your car. I can get you a terrific rate, unlimited mileage, and you can go wherever you want. There are ferries to Corfu on the eastern coast and on the west to Sardinia and Corsica. Have you ever been there?"

"No." He had told her that he had once traveled a lot.

"Or you could just drive down the boot to the Straits of Messina and cross into Sicily."

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She spoke of Syracuse and Agrigento with an enthusiasm that reminded him how at odds he had been with Martha's running negative criticism of wherever they went.

"I think I'll go."

"Great. When would you like to book?"

She was astounded that he could go whenever he liked. "Shouldn't you check with your wife?"

"She won't be going."

"Oh."

"I'm a widower."

"Aha. Well, maybe this will have romantic possibilities too."

"No one could take her place."

She tipped her head to one side and smiled sadly, admiration in her eyes.

He decided on three weeks before the tourist season really heated up. From mid-April into May. He hesitated about the car, thinking a Eurorail Pass might be wiser, but the agent pointed out he wouldn't have the same freedom.

"You may want to go where the trains don't go."

He liked the image of himself as an intrepid explorer, forever plunging into the interior where no man had gone before. He had her arrange for the car. Driving in Italy did not of itself appeal, but if he stayed out of Rome and took the autostrada around Naples, he could do it.

The plane was delayed in Chicago, but he made his connection at Dulles and was on his way. There wasn't an empty seat and he imagined Martha commenting on the disgraceful way the airlines jammed people in. He turned her off. He was going to enjoy everything, see the bright side, be happy. There was a great deal of camaraderie on the crowded plane, and Richard walked the aisles, not talking with anyone, but feeling he was taking part in all the conversations. Everyone seemed so excited to be going to Italy.

That's the way it should be, of course. It's what Martha never learned, the art of enjoying things.

The screw up at Eurocar would have driven Martha crazy, but Richard enjoyed it. He was in no hurry. As soon as he had his car he would just take off, what difference did an hour or so make? He noticed that, despite a little irritation, the other people were just moving with the flow.

He drove first to Anzio where the Allies had landed under General Mark Clark to take the pressure off the troops pinned down at Monte

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Cassino. He continued down the coast to Gaeta. He had never heard of it and there was nothing about it in the guidebook he had bought. This gave him the sense of being off the map, a traveler not a tourist.

From Gaeta he cut over to the autostrada and above Naples switched to the Salerno road. At Salerno, on impulse, he decided to see the Amalfi Coast.

He was enthralled by the narrow road that crept along the rocky coast above the azure sea, clinging to its contours, so that for fifteen kilometers he did nothing but turn left and right on the serpentine road. Fifteen kilometers and it took almost an hour, because buses forced traffic to stop so that they could edge around a corner. It was nerve-wracking and crazy and fun. But there was no way he could enjoy the scenery. To look at the sea, even for a moment, was to risk a head-on crash, and the same was true of the vineyards and orange groves that clung to little patches of land high above. Richard went as fast as he dared, as fast as any sane driver should go on such a road, yet there was the constant sound of a horn behind as some daredevil sought to pass him.

And then he came to Amalfi. It seemed unreal, nestled in its cove, the buildings seemingly piled atop one another, a massive basilica with steps as broad as the road inviting Richard into its coolness. He determined to stay.

The town was jammed with Germans and Italians from elsewhere and he was turned away from several hotels. He had shown one finger when asked how many nights he meant to stay. Perhaps that was the problem.

He retraced his route half a kilometer to a hotel that rose up with the cliff against which it was built. There was a postage-stamp parking lot and he swung into it. Before getting out of the car, he looked back at Amalfi, he looked out at the sea, he breathed deeply and pushed open the door. He prayed to whoever the local saint was that he would find a room here.

"For how many nights?"

"Una settimana."

"Molto bene."

He had never spoken a foreign language before, dissuaded from the effort by Martha, who said she *wanted* people to know they were Americans. His room faced the sea—all the rooms faced the sea, there was only mountain on the other side—and had a balcony almost as large as the room. Meals were available in the hotel and

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there was a sunroof with a pool not yet in operation. A week did not seem too long to stay in paradise.

He could walk down to Amalfi along the coastal road, enabling him to leave the car in the parking lot. Martha would have called Amalfi a tourist trap, and so perhaps it was, but who could resist it? On the arched entry to the old town was a stanza from a poet Richard had never heard of, but he could make out the meaning:

> On the day of judgment, when the
> Citizens of Amalfi enter Paradise,
> It will seem a day like any other.

It was a paradise. He read about the coast and imagined it as it had been when the Romans sought refuge here in the time of Marcus Aurelius, he imagined the pirates who had used these inlets, accessible only by sea. That precarious road would have been chipped into the rocky coast much later.

On the third day, a tourist bus honked beneath his balcony and he looked down, thinking it was simply another stalled vehicle. But it had pulled over and was disgorging passengers at the hotel. He watched them get out, older people, people his age, their limbs creaking with inactivity, wearing gaudy clothes, cameras strung around their necks, and his heart went out to them in welcome. The impulse to resent them was gone. Why should he want to have paradise to himself?

They were booked into the hotel for five days. In the morning when he went down to breakfast they were already there, commenting on the cold ham and cheese laid out for breakfast. It was obviously the first time any of them had been abroad, and the package tour by bus had seemed a good idea. Everything was arranged for them, hotels, meals, what they would see, when they would go on to the next place. He almost envied them their scheduled existence, their being in a group. Many of them were couples of course, but there seemed a significant number of unattended women. Widows.

In the evening dinner was served on the roof, under a thatched awning, with music provided by a soulful violin. It was at dinner that Richard first became aware of her.

She was a tall, stern woman who wore her purse lashed across her body, a precaution against the thieves she was at the moment talking about.

"If they don't steal your purse, they'll cheat you with change. Today, when we bought the cones, I gave the man one of those big notes, ten thousand lire. . . ."

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The voice was more penetrating than the violin, and to Richard more fascinating. He shamelessly eavesdropped on her account of her dismal day.

In the morning, at breakfast, she was already in full cry. "They call it *prima colazione*. I call it *prima collusione*. Tours shouldn't encourage them to think they can palm off this sort of thing as a breakfast. Don't order coffee, it's mud and milk."

When they marched off like a scout troop, going down the road to Amalfi, he missed them. After ten minutes, he went after them. He caught up with them in the basilica and pushed his face into his guidebook, keeping close to them. Her voice was audible in the great echoing church although she was whispering because those who wanted to hear the guide kept hushing her.

"Idols," she said. "Graven images. Should we light a candle?"

"Oh, Annette."

"They're not real candles. Look. And here's the slot for the money. It's like Las Vegas."

That night at dinner her topic was again the food. Eating Italian was all right at home, as a change, but when you had to have it day after day, meal after meal, well, gimme a break. Afterwards they all moved into the bar where Annette complained that they didn't have any Milwaukee beer.

"Annette, you don't even drink beer."

"They have Dutch beer, they have English beer."

Richard stepped to the bar and ordered a beer. Annette was with two small ladies who might have been sisters, and he could hear them whispering. When he had his beer, he turned and smiled at Annette.

"You're an American, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes, I am." He joined them.

"These two said you were German but I knew you were an American. Know how?"

"Tell me."

"You're not enjoying this a bit, are you? You planned this trip and dreamt about it and here you are and what does it amount to, after all?"

"You're not enjoying yourself?"

"From here we go to Naples. Can you imagine? Capri. Now I've heard a thing or two about Capri."

He stayed with them for an hour. They asked why he was alone and he said he was a widower. They joked that he should join their tour.

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"I might start enjoying myself."

He left them laughing.

In the morning, he took his roll and ham and cheese to their table and had the waiter bring him *caffè latte*.

"You'll be sor-ry," Annette said.

He went with them into the town where they shopped the stores that catered to tourists. Annette bought a few things.

"It's just junk of course. They're souvenirs."

The group had sandwiches in the town and then started for the hotel. When they passed under the archway, the guide translated the poem for them. "Paradise," Annette said in a stage whisper. "Purgatory at best."

There was no walkway on the road; they had to keep close to the railing and hug it whenever a car screeched by.

"They're all insane," Annette cried. "They have no sense of the value of human life."

On their last night, the dinner took on the dimensions of a banquet. The violinist was joined by drums, a saxophone, and an accordion. There was dancing.

The two friends giggled when he asked Annette to dance. She complained about the music. She had made the mistake of having what was called *bistecca* for dinner. "Beefsteak! It was the skin of the beast rather than its meat."

She keened on like Cassandra, an inconsolable voice, a woman impossible to please. From the roof garden they could look down at the road which trailed away to the left. Below, lashed by waves, was a Norman tower. He drew her attention to it.

"Strung with lights! Isn't that awful?"

He suggested that they take a walk.

"A walk!"

"It's your last night."

She was flustered but then, probably thinking ahead to when she would tell of this at home, she agreed.

They went down in the elevator and outside, and were almost immediately on the edge of the road. Twice they were about to cross over when a car came screaming around a curve and she leapt back.

"I hate this place," she said. "Let's go back."

Out on the inky sea, the lights of a ship were visible. Above, stars by the millions winked in the sky. Below, the sound of the water, crashing against the rocks, rhythmically, over and over again, rose to them.

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"Come on." He took her hand and they dashed across the road where she gripped the rail.

"Let's just stay here."

"Why don't we walk up to where we can see the Norman castle?"

"It's so dark." She leaned over the railing to look down at the water foaming against the rocks. He pulled her back.

"Not yet."

They started up the road, Annette gripping the rail with one hand and his arm with the other. There was so much for her to hate in the night—the incessant noise of the sea, she didn't know how they could sleep with that racket going on, the fishy smell that rose even to her window, and these drivers, she just hated it. She paused to look out over the rail, down at the rocks and the sea.

"I'm still scared."

"Don't be," Richard said. "I'm right behind you."

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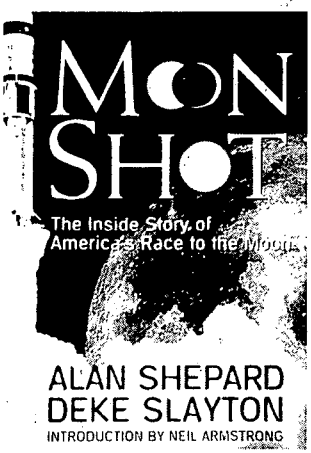

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A *NEW* short story by

MARGARET YORKE

Margaret Yorke's first mystery novel appeared in 1970, but it was hardly her literary debut. By then the former librarian already had eleven mainstream novels in print. Ms. Yorke's novels and stories turn around character development rather than plot, but as you'll see in this story, she knows how to create suspense and a sense of sinister things to come . . .

A LITTLE DOSE OF FRIENDSHIP

by MARGARET YORKE

Mrs. Wilberforce sat knitting by a window. Outside, the Atlantic Ocean spread before her, dark and mysterious, huge rollers billowing but with scarcely a whitecap to be seen. The ship rode with the sea's movement like a hobbyhorse at a fair. Mrs. Wilberforce had sailed, by way of Bermuda, to the United States of America and the Canadian eastern seaboard, and now the vessel in which she was a passenger was heading home.

She cruised annually, often, as this year, for a full month. In the past, she had flown to far-off areas and traversed distant seas. Expense was not a problem. At ports, she took sightseeing tours, clambering into coaches to be driven around strange cities, staring out at skyscrapers and scenic wonders, a goldfish in a bowl, seeing but not experiencing the local life. Sometimes the motion of the coach sent her to sleep, though she slept well on board, lulled like a baby in its cradle by the movements of the great white ship which carried her.

On this cruise, she shared a table in the restaurant with two couples travelling together, and Amelia. There was usually an Amelia of one kind or another on her voyages—another solitary soul.

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Cruises attracted solitary ladies, even solitary gentlemen, but Mrs. Wilberforce sought no partner for her remaining years. What she looked for was only a little dose of friendship.

"I'm all alone," she had told the pretty woman in the bright blue slacks and spotless white sweatshirt who had paused beside her in the Fiesta bar, out of whose large windows she enjoyed looking at the ocean. She had spoken brightly, accepting her situation in the world. The pretty woman—Isobel—had asked her if she had been ashore, had described the energetic walk she and her husband had taken round the city of Quebec in brilliant, chilly autumn sunshine. She'd spoken of Montcalm and Wolfe, of artists' studios and cobbled streets, alighting like a butterfly beside Dorothy Wilberforce to point out locations on a map.

Mrs. Wilberforce had dropped her statement into their talk, irrelevantly.

"You mean cruising alone?" Isobel, fortunately partnered, knew that many of the passengers were not accompanied.

"Yes—that, of course, but in every way," said Mrs. Wilberforce in a cheerful tone, picking up a stitch she had dropped, through inattention while window-gazing, in the square she was knitting to form part of a blanket for the needy. Who would sew together all those different squares, Isobel, no knitter, wondered; the crafts organizer, whose job seemed to be a sort of occupational therapy for the passengers? "I'm a widow," Dorothy was adding.

"No children?" asked Isobel, wishing now that she had not stopped to chat.

"No. I had a sister, but she died last year," said Dorothy. "She had no children either."

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry," said Isobel. She stood up, irresolute, not wanting to offend but not ready to listen to the story of the older woman's lonely life. "That's sad," she said, comforted in the knowledge that she had two sons and a daughter and the probability ahead of her, when the time was right, of grandchildren.

"It doesn't matter," said Dorothy. "I'm used to it."

Why had she said that, she wondered, as Isobel, declaring she must write some postcards, moved away. This pleasant woman would not talk to her again. Meanwhile, however, Mrs. Wilberforce's new and faithful friend Amelia would be there at lunch, her thin pointed nose alert as if to sniff the details of Dorothy's quiet morning spent on board. This afternoon they were setting out together on a trip to view the autumn leaves; "Fall Foliage," as the tour was

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attractively described. The itinerary was not demanding and included tea at a mountain vantage point.

Amelia, a keen walker and a lot younger than Dorothy Wilberforce, had been ashore that morning, but Dorothy had not felt up to walking round the ramparts of the city, even though there was a funicular to take one to the top. Amelia would describe it all and would have bought some postcards. She'd be writing to her nephew, as she did from every port. He lived in Purley and Amelia often stayed with him and his wife Theresa, who was expecting a baby. Dorothy had liked hearing about the hardworking young couple devoted to their aunt, and she'd helped Amelia choose a soft cuddly bear for the baby.

When Amelia returned to the ship, her nose was pink from the cold outside, her eyes bright. For a disloyal instant, Dorothy was reminded of a ferret, nostrils quivering, scenting prey, then banished the reflection. Amelia was a plain woman who had missed the joys of marriage—something Dorothy had enjoyed for twenty years—and the grief of loss. Dorothy's husband had been well insured; she was, if not rich, very comfortably off, living in a large bungalow near Bournemouth. They had retired there, and two years later Jack had died, dropping dead one day while planting a new rosebush, a weeping standard, Alberic Barbier, which now thrived. Dorothy had scattered Jack's ashes round it, forking them in a little, not wanting the fragments to disperse. She had loved Jack gently and sincerely and he'd loved her too. There had been that brief escapade with his secretary when he was in his forties; she'd watched and waited, aware of the danger, doing nothing to precipitate a crisis, and gradually things had settled down. Maura had left, he'd told her, the information imparted in a throwaway manner one Friday evening just before friends invited to dinner had arrived.

"Oh," Dorothy had answered calmly. "That's sudden."

"Yes," he'd agreed, drawing the cork from a bottle of burgundy which he then set to breathe on the sideboard. "Some family trouble. Her sister's ill."

Dorothy had never known that Maura had a sister. She hoped the trouble was not of a more personal nature, but there were some things it was better not to know.

"I see," she said. "You'll miss her."

"I'm promoting Hazel," he had replied. Hazel worked in the typing pool. She was a plump, jolly girl in her first job; she'd lasted four years with Jack before marrying and having several babies, and

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she had been followed by Karen, a divorced mother of two teenagers who had remained with Jack until he retired.

Dorothy wrenched her thoughts back from the past, wherein they often strayed, and directed them to the fall foliage as she accompanied Amelia to the ship's restaurant for lunch. She consumed soup, sole, and apple crumble, then set off for the coach.

Their tour was pleasant, though Dorothy, after her good meal, dozed off once or twice and missed some of the fine vistas of golden leaves interspersed with bright splashes of scarlet from the maples. They stopped in a small village and entered a little church, whitewashed within and spare.

"How modern," said Amelia.

"Not at all," said Dorothy. "It's three hundred years old." Her response sounded tart to her own ears and she softened it by adding, "Though I suppose that is modern, by our standards, when our churches are so much older."

"That's what I meant," said Amelia, apparently unruffled.

That night she went to the cabaret while Dorothy took herself off to the concert given by the professional pianist who was one of the entertainers. He played various Chopin pieces and then requests suggested by the audience. During his performance the ship began to roll and that night the seas grew rough.

Dorothy did not mind the gale, but she found walking round the passages a problem as the vessel lurched and rocked. Her own cabin was amidships, so her discomfort was minimised by being at the centre of the axis, but she knew that Amelia's, on a lower deck, was in the bow, and feared that she would suffer. Each day, Dorothy went up on deck to get some air, but she did not walk about. Amelia had disappeared, absent for meals, so Dorothy telephoned her cabin to learn that she was most unwell. She did not wish to be visited; the steward was taking care of her and she would ring the doctor if she felt no better.

When she surfaced, Amelia's nose had a pale tip and her cheeks were gaunt. Dorothy advised soup and cream crackers, suggesting food might help to settle the sufferer's stomach. The seas abated to a degree and Amelia began to eat again. She went to Bingo, while Dorothy continued knitting squares, a pink one and a yellow. The blankets would be gaudy when they were assembled; perhaps they would cheer up the recipients, the children or the elderly, thought Dorothy. She was elderly herself, and ahead lay the long winter with the garden cold and uninviting. Mr. Forster, who ran the local

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taxi service, would take her shopping once a week—she could no longer drive. He would meet her when they docked.

She went to a film about San Francisco and dozed off at a crucial moment, missing the point of the story. Then the last night came.

By now the ship was in calmer waters and land was visible, to everyone's relief. Farewells were exchanged, addresses written down. Dorothy thought it was rather like the end of term. Some of the crew, including several of the entertainers, were going home; they were excited and happy.

"Goodbye, Amelia. We'll keep in touch," said Dorothy, who did not mean to do so. Shipboard acquaintances were better kept as such, with perhaps a Christmas card the first year and then silence.

She thought she might not cruise again. All those white heads and walking sticks depressed her, and she worried about the stewards and crew, most of them from India or other countries where poverty was endemic: what did they feel about the extravagance and waste, the endless courses on the menu, the heaped-up plates of those using the buffet on the deck? Greedy passengers ate in a day enough to keep an impoverished family for a week. But their fares paid the crew's wages.

Donating the sum she had spent on this holiday to a charity could have been a better use for the money, Dorothy reflected, closing up the holdall which contained her toilet things and nightdress. On the other hand, she had been looked after and had company, surely worthwhile ends in themselves. But what use was she to anyone?

Such thoughts were negative. She turned her mind towards home, to the prospect of Mr. Forster carrying in her luggage and Linda Cherry, her cleaning lady, brewing coffee—really good, fresh coffee. She'd bought a soapstone polar bear and a bottle of duty-free scent for Linda, and whisky for Mr. Forster, who liked a nip. Perhaps, next year, she'd spend a week in Cornwall, in a good hotel.

The passengers disembarked in sections, upper decks first. Dorothy looked for Mr. Forster, who would have had to park his black Granada in the pound and claim her on foot before being allowed to drive in and collect her.

She could not see him. Cars and taxis were coming and going; happy reunions were achieved; and people got into cars which had been left with a local garage that returned them to the dockside for this moment. None of those looking about for passengers was Mr. Forster. Then she saw a man holding a large card bearing the name MRS. DOROTHY WILBERFORCE.

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She wasn't Mrs. Dorothy Wilberforce. She was still Mrs. Jack Wilberforce. Dorothy had been proud of that position, the status it had granted her. Before she married Jack she had been a bank clerk, and had not considered herself high in the pecking order. However, for practical purposes, these days, such niceties were of no account, and, tentatively, she approached.

The man, who was about thirty, thickset, with sandy hair clipped very short, wore a chauffeur's cap and dark jacket. He stepped forward as she approached and said, "Mrs. Wilberforce of Poplar Lodge?"

"Yes," said Dorothy. "Where's Mr. Forster?"

"He's broken his leg," said the man. "I'm helping him out. Ron Baldwin's the name."

"Oh," said Dorothy. "I see. Poor Mr. Forster."

"These your bags?" asked Ron, and he picked up her two cases, one of which ran on wheels. Despite the rules, his car was parked nearby.

"Yes," said Dorothy. "Thank you."

Ron stowed them in the boot of the car—a grey Sierra—helping Mrs. Wilberforce into the rear seat and aiding her as she secured the seat belt, then slid behind the wheel.

"How did Mr. Forster break his leg?" she asked as Ron drove swiftly out of the dock area.

"It was a road accident," said Ron. "He stepped in front of a car which didn't stop."

"Oh dear! Where was this?" asked Mrs. Wilberforce.

"At his garage. It was very dark—a moonless night. The car reversed away from one of the pumps instead of going forward."

As well as running a taxi service, Mr. Forster did repairs and sold petrol, employing one lad to help him.

"How dreadful. Is he in hospital?"

"He is, and he'll be there awhile yet, all tied up to ropes and pulleys," Ron informed her.

"Traction. It must be bad," said Mrs. Wilberforce.

Ron did not reply, concentrating on accelerating as they passed the city limits and reached the open countryside. Sunlight slanted amongst the trees, oaks and beeches and a few surviving elms. The fall foliage here was just as lovely as the spectacle she had seen across the Atlantic, thought Mrs. Wilberforce; it was simply on a smaller scale. She sat silent; already her homecoming was not as she expected, but Linda Cherry would be waiting for her when she

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reached home. She clung to that thought until Ron spoke again.

"Mrs. Cherry has had to leave you," he said. "She's ever so sorry, but there it is. She's been offered a full-time job elsewhere and she couldn't afford to turn it down, but she's made arrangements for you. My auntie will be helping out. I'll be bringing her to see you this afternoon."

Helping out, he'd said, just as he was helping out Mr. Forster.

"I see," said Mrs. Wilberforce, who didn't see at all. Linda Cherry had been with her for years, coming twice a week to clean the house and polish the silver. She went also to another house nearby, and professed herself content with these two jobs. She simply liked to earn enough to feel independent and provide a treat or two for herself and Fred, who was a bus driver. They had one daughter, still in school, the apple of their eye.

As if to match Mrs. Wilberforce's change of mood, the sky grew dark and it began to rain. To and fro went the Sierra's wipers as her spirits sank. No Mr. Forster, and now no Linda, but instead of them, Ron and his unknown auntie. She sat quietly, trying to adjust as they drove along. After a while, Ron removed his chauffeur's cap and laid it beside him on the passenger's seat. Then he turned on the radio, and pop music was relayed to Mrs. Wilberforce's unwilling ears, but she did not like to protest. Anyway, the noise prevented conversation; she did not want to hear news of other changes.

After past cruises, she had regaled Mr. Forster with tales of her travels, descriptions of ports visited and the people she had met. Now there was nothing to say. She stared at the back of Ron's head, where the fair hair sprang strongly from his thick red neck. His ears were large, with big pendant lobes. She had never liked large ears. Looking away from this alien sight, she caught his eye in the driving mirror and glanced quickly away; his expression was almost sly, she thought, annoyed that he had noticed her interest.

After today, they need not meet again. Mr. Forster would recover. There was the weekly shopping, though: would Ron expect to take her? She need not employ him; there were several taxi firms in the area. But would Mr. Forster lose income if she hired someone else? And there was the aunt. Well, she need not decide about either of them now. She closed her eyes and briefly dozed, waking when Ron braked suddenly as he cut in past a cruising Rover Montego on the dual carriageway. After that she sat tensely, aware that he was not as careful a driver as Mr. Forster.

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At Poplar Lodge, he waited while she found her key and unlocked the front door, then took her bags in, just as Mr. Forster always did. She wrote him a cheque, and he asked her to make it out to him, which seemed reasonable as he had done the journey in what was, presumably, his own car. It was only after he left, and Dorothy was starting to unpack, that she realised he had taken her luggage to her bedroom without being told which door to open. How had he known where to go?

Tired and depressed, she dismissed the question as foolish and went into the kitchen to make coffee. This was the moment when Linda Cherry should have been there, hiding her expectancy, waiting for the present her employer would certainly have bought for her. Mrs. Wilberforce settled for instant coffee and, because breakfast on the ship had been early, nibbled a digestive biscuit which she did not finish. Somehow, it had no flavour. She returned to finish her unpacking, a task Linda had always helped her with before, folding tissue paper and hanging up the black evening skirt and array of blouses which were the answers to problems of attire for nights of varying formality.

There was mail waiting, some bills and circulars, but no personal letters; so many of Mrs. Wilberforce's contemporaries had died that nowadays she received few letters that were not to do with business—her stocks and shares, her pension, her statements from the bank. She sat at her desk and wrote cheques, addressed envelopes, and stamped them; she would take them to the letter box on the corner in the morning, if the postman did not call. He would always take them for her when he visited the house.

After this she felt tired and decided to lie down. She'd had no lunch, but she wanted none. She might thaw out a frozen meal this evening and watch television; that would pass the time. In bed, under the quilt, her skirt off and her shoes placed neatly on the floor, she fell asleep, forgetting about Ron and his aunt, due that afternoon.

A sound woke her. Her legs were no longer strong and she needed spectacles, but her hearing was still acute. What she had heard was the front door opening. Who could it be? Only Linda Cherry had a key. Perhaps she had come to explain her abrupt departure. Mrs. Wilberforce sat up, clutching the quilt to her thin chest, and she heard the sound of voices from the hall, first a man's and then a woman's.

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With a pang of dismay, she remembered Ron's promise to bring round his aunt, but they would ring the bell. These were burglars, imagining that she was still away. She was stretching out her hand to lift the telephone when the bedroom door was opened.

"Well, dear, isn't this nice?" said Amelia from the ship, her thin nose pinker than ever as she entered the room, smiling what Dorothy Wilberforce now saw as a Judas smile. "Ron said you'd be needing some help, and here I am. I'm sure you'd appreciate a nice cup of tea. Ron's just putting the kettle on." She advanced and stood looking down at Dorothy. "Just rest, my dear," she instructed. "Your worries are all over. We'll take care of everything. Ron's my nephew," she added superfluously.

When Linda Cherry received a letter from Mrs. Wilberforce, written from the ship, saying that her services would no longer be required, she was most upset. The letter stated that on the cruise Mrs. Wilberforce had met a very pleasant lady who, when they returned, would be moving into Poplar Lodge as a companion-helper. There was not even a cheque in lieu of notice, which was unlike Mrs. Wilberforce, who had always been most generous. Linda was bitterly hurt. So was Mr. Forster, who also received a letter. His told him not to meet her at the port as a friend would give her a lift home. He and Linda Cherry did not compare notes with one another as, whilst Linda lived one mile from Poplar Lodge, Mr. Forster's garage was two miles in the other direction. Eventually they met when Linda stopped to fill her car with petrol at Mr. Forster's pump, and by then they had both decided that if this was the way Mrs. Wilberforce wanted things, so be it. Linda found another job and Mr. Forster, his legs undamaged, carried on as normal.

Mrs. Wilberforce's bills were paid, her dividends were received, and a letter authorising Amelia Dixon to cash cheques on her account was accepted by the bank. Mrs. Wilberforce's signature was witnessed by Ron Baldwin. A grey Sierra car went, unremarked, in and out of Poplar Lodge. It was succeeded by a blue Mercedes. The bungalow was screened from the road by banks of trees and shrubs; comings and goings were not observed by neighbours, although a blond woman in a white Porsche was sometimes seen and occasionally there seemed to be late parties.

A letter stating that Mrs. Wilberforce's account was overdrawn came from the bank, with a request that she make an appointment to see the manager. Amelia telephoned, speaking on behalf of Doro-

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thy Wilberforce and saying that matters would be attended to as soon as she had recovered from an attack of influenza. After this, boards went up outside the house, advertising it for sale.

Isobel saw them when, a year after meeting Mrs. Wilberforce on the cruise, she drove that way after a visit to friends in the neighbourhood. She had suddenly remembered the pleasant, lonely old woman she had seen standing on a verandah, a little forlorn, staring at the autumn leaves from the viewpoint at the foot of the Laurentian mountains. Isobel had felt guilty at abandoning the woman earlier that day in the ship's lounge and had sought to make amends. They had had tea together in the timbered clubhouse at the golf course, which was the spot from which they gazed upon the foliage. Golf carts bearing happy players trundled past the window as they drank tea and ate shortcake. Isobel's husband was not there; he had met a business friend in Quebec, leaving her to take the excursion without him. Later, before the ship docked, she had obtained Mrs. Wilberforce's address and had sent her a Christmas card, though she had not received one in return, but you shouldn't expect too much from the old. She remembered that Dorothy had said she was alone in the world, without even, it seemed, a cousin.

She decided to pay her a call. It wouldn't take up much time.

The bungalow could not be seen from the road. Isobel recalled Mrs. Wilberforce mentioning the garden; she had been fond of it, and her roses. Hadn't she mentioned a weeping Alberic Barbier? Isobel, a woman who kept her word, had not ignored Mrs. Wilberforce during the remainder of the cruise; they had had brief chats in the Fiesta Lounge, and on deck, braving the Atlantic gale. Now, Isobel saw the For Sale boards by the gates, then the neglected state of the place, the long grass on either side of the drive, the overgrown rosebushes. There was a straggling Iceber, loaded with withered blooms. From the car, she could not see the Alberic Barbier. Wasn't it yellow? It might have ceased blooming now; most of the roses were over.

Had Mrs. Wilberforce died? Was that why the house was for sale? It was possible: she must have been about eighty.

Filled with foreboding, Isobel parked the car and got out. The curtains hung flat at the blank windows which were, she saw, rather dirty. On the ship, Mrs. Wilberforce had always been well dressed. She was, though old, elegant, and not the type of person to tolerate an untidy garden and grubby windows.

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Increasingly uneasy, Isobel rang the bell, and after some delay the door was opened by a young woman in leopardlike leggings and a gold-spangled knitted tunic. She wore high-heeled shoes, and several flashy bracelets jangled on both wrists as she took a cigarette from her mouth in order to speak.

"Yes?" she said. "Have you come to see the house? Appointments have to be made through the agent."

"Mrs. Wilberforce is dead, then," said Isobel flatly. "Who are you?" She couldn't be a niece or a granddaughter; there were none.

"Who's Mrs. Wilberforce?" asked the young woman.

"This is her house," said Isobel firmly. "Or it was a year ago."

She knew she had come to the right place: the name, Poplar Lodge, had been visible on a board by the gate.

"Oh, you mean Ron's old gran, do you? Yes, she's dead, poor old thing," said the woman.

But there had been no grandson Ron. What could the woman mean?

"When did she die?" asked Isobel. "What of?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask Ron. She left him the house and everything, but we're selling up. It's too quiet here," said the woman.

"You're Ron's wife?" Isobel uttered the question carefully. Something was very wrong here, or else Mrs. Wilberforce had been playing for sympathy, professing an isolation that did not exist.

"Not exactly," said the woman, and laughed. "It's only a bit of paper, isn't it? Common law, it's called. Ron's out now. I'll tell him you came." But she did not ask Isobel's name.

"It doesn't matter," said Isobel, now anxious to get away. "Where does Mrs. Cherry live?" she asked, as she turned to go.

"Never heard of her," said the woman.

There were such things as telephone directories. Isobel got back into her VW Golf and drove carefully down the drive to the gates. As she went, she saw the umbrella shape of the weeping rose in the unkempt grass at the side of what had once been the lawn. Five minutes after she left, Ron, in his Mercedes, returned.

Isobel traced Linda Cherry. There were several Cherrys in the directory and she tried three before finding the one who had worked for Mrs. Wilberforce for so many years. Dorothy Wilberforce had mentioned her when Isobel, waiting to disembark from the ship, had enquired if there would be someone to help her when she reached home. Thank goodness she had remembered the name; it

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was a pretty one; she had said so when she heard it and Dorothy had said that Linda was a pretty woman.

"Well, pleasant-looking, really," she amended. "I'm fond of her."

Tracked down, Linda suggested that Isobel should come straight round to Number Six, Parson's Way, where she lived, and she gave directions. Soon, Isobel was sitting in Linda's lounge with a cup of tea and a piece of gingerbread while Linda described how upset she had been at her sudden dismissal and how, using Christmas as her excuse, she had gone to Poplar Lodge with a card and a home-baked sponge cake such as Mrs. Wilberforce so enjoyed. The door had been opened by a thin-faced woman with a pointed nose, the new companion, who had said that Mrs. Wilberforce was resting and could see no one that day. She had accepted the cake and the card, but there had been no acknowledgement, no note of thanks nor a telephone call. Linda had not repeated her visit.

"She had no relations," Isobel said.

"That's right," said Linda. "No one at all, and her friends had died. It gets ever so lonely when you're old."

"Yes," agreed Isobel, and shivered suddenly. "But that woman who answered the door said that Mrs. Wilberforce was her partner's grandmother. She's dead," she added. "Dorothy Wilberforce, I mean. She left everything to Ron, this woman said, and they're selling up because it's so quiet."

"But that's not right," said Linda. "We'd have known if she'd died, surely? Or Mr. Forster would. He often helps out the undertaker."

"Who's Mr. Forster?"

"The taxi. He drove her such a lot, but he was told not to meet her off the boat," Linda said. "A friend was giving her a lift, she said, in a note."

But Isobel remembered mention of a taxi.

"What friend?" she wanted to know, and Linda could not tell her.

Isobel had to return home that night, but she came back two days later and visited Mr. Forster. She called, also, at the office of the estate agent who was handling the sale of Poplar Lodge. Linda Cherry knew which doctor looked after Mrs. Wilberforce, and Isobel went to the surgery, but she received a dusty answer there because patients' affairs were sacrosanct. A nurse, however, admitted that Mrs. Wilberforce had not been seen for more than a year, which was surprising, as she often got bad colds in the winter and usually needed a little attention.

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"I'm going to call the police," said Isobel. "If there's nothing wrong, they'll tell us, and if there is, the sooner it's discovered the better."

Since Isobel was not a relative, the police took some convincing that there was cause for concern, but Linda knew where Mrs. Wilberforce kept her bank account, and a detective was able to discover that cheques had been cashed for more than a year by an authorised person, Amelia Dixon, and later by a Ronald Baldwin. Signatures had seemed to be authentic; such arrangements were quite customary for the elderly, and there had been no occasion to question the practice. However, Mrs. Wilberforce had been spending more freely than in years past, it was true, the bank conceded, not revealing that she was in debt.

An inspector and a woman officer went round to Poplar Lodge where a man opened the door to them and told them that Mrs. Wilberforce was away on her annual cruise. Meanwhile, he was looking after the place, which was up for sale. She was moving into a sheltered accommodation, he declared. The inspector asked for the name of the ship, and when told, made contact with the cruise line, to learn that no passenger of that name was registered at present. The vessel was now in the South Pacific.

By the time the inspector and his colleague, with two uniformed officers, returned to Poplar Lodge, Ron had gone; so had the woman whom Isobel had met, and they had stripped the place of every bit of furniture. It was quite empty; curtains and carpets had gone: everything that had marked a life had vanished.

The bodies were found in the garden. Mrs. Wilberforce's was close to the rose tree that had thrived on her husband's ashes; it was naked, and ringless, in an advanced state of decomposition and identified by her dentist. Amelia's was near the lily pond and it had been disposed of more recently. A large quantity of barbiturate was found in the remains, and there were signs of suffocation, possibly by means of a plastic bag. The cause of Mrs. Wilberforce's death was more difficult to establish, but because of the method of disposal, foul play was a near certainty. Traces of barbiturate were later found, and fragments of wool, proved to come from a sweater which was on the corpse of Amelia, were found around the hands, as if Mrs. Wilberforce had dragged at the wearer's garment as she lost consciousness, perhaps as she was held down by Amelia.

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It took patience and many interviews to piece the story together. Amelia—whom Isobel identified from a photograph taken aboard the ship—had befriended Dorothy Wilberforce and learned of her solitary state. She had taken Dorothy's door key at some point—perhaps offering to mind her handbag while Dorothy visited the library—and had had another cut in Quebec, then sent this back to Ron Baldwin, who was genuinely her nephew, in a letter innocently carried by a dancer from the ship's entertainment troupe who flew back to England from Montreal. Amelia had also written to Linda Cherry and to Mr. Forster, and enclosed the letters with the key so that Ron posted them all in England. She had had ample opportunity to practise Dorothy Wilberforce's signature, which she had copied from the charge card carried on board. This had been enough, too, to secure the arrangements at the bank and to effect other business deals, for Ron had been able to witness his aunt's forgeries. Amelia saw no reason why they should not live out the rest of their lives at Poplar Lodge, but Ron had broken up with his wife, the blonde with the Porsche, who had never, in fact, been pregnant but was seen occasionally at first at Poplar Lodge. There had been payments to her to keep her quiet; then his new girlfriend had been extravagant and greedy. She had known nothing about Amelia.

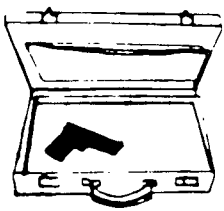
If he'd managed to sell the house before Isobel's visit, he might have got away with it.

"Or if you'd never called," said Linda Cherry, who was wishing she had been more persistent, though it was clear that Mrs. Wilberforce had been murdered almost at once after her return from the fatal cruise.

"Or if you'd done nothing about it," said Mr. Forster. This was after Dorothy's belated funeral at the local church.

"They'd have been found out in the end," said Isobel. "The bank would have become suspicious eventually, or some business transaction would have needed investigating."

But they didn't catch Ron until his estranged wife realised, from the newspaper reports about the bodies in the garden, that he had killed his own aunt, and she shopped him.



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There will probably always be Sherlock Holmes pastiches, for the simple reason that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective lives forever in the imagination of virtually everyone who claims to be a mystery lover. Robert Richardson's Christmas Holmes adventure is one of the best we've seen in years. The author is the current chairman of the Crime Writers Association of Britain and has written seven mystery novels published by St. Martin's Press. . . .

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

by ROBERT RICHARDSON

It snowed heavily on Christmas Eve, 1889, the year of my marriage. When we rose on Christmas morning, London was muffled in white, familiar landmarks unidentifiable as presents wrapped in thick paper, stillness and silence the more pronounced in thoroughfares that normally clattered with the ceaseless activity of the city. We entertained no company, and, after exchanging gifts, enjoyed of our first Christmas luncheon together. As we finished, Mary's kindly mind turned to one she knew was alone that day.

"I still regret Mr. Holmes would not join us," she said. "I find it depressing to think of him on his own in those gloomy rooms."

"He will be perfectly content," I replied. "He will read his books, smoke, and play the violin. His only irritation will be the inertia of a day when even criminals may observe goodwill to men."

"So you have told me," she replied. "But will he eat?"

"He will certainly not starve."

"Nonetheless, I insist that you take him some cold goose and mince pies," she said. "I shall ask cook to prepare them immediately."

"Go to Baker Street in this weather?" I protested. "There can be no cabs operating."

"It is now a fine, sunny day," she replied. "The snow is not so deep that you cannot walk half a mile."

I protested no further. Her consideration was Christian and sincere and it would have been churlish to refuse my role in fulfilling

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it. Holmes would be indifferent to whether I visited or not, and a walk after such an abundant meal was not a displeasing prospect.

The snow, while deep, was not impassable and there were others abroad with whom I exchanged seasonal greetings as I trudged my way. I turned out of Marylebone Road into Baker Street, where I followed another's footprints before they crossed to the other side. I knew that Mrs. Hudson was visiting relatives and, on knocking, expected to have to wait some moments until Holmes descended. In fact, I heard him hurry down the stairs, and he opened the front door with alacrity.

"You, Watson?" he said in evident surprise. "I was expecting . . ." He stepped out and looked up and down the street. "Have you seen anybody?"

"Not in Baker Street. Are you expecting a visitor?"

"Yes. She will approach from that direction"—he pointed to the north—"once she has decided. . . ." Abruptly, he became aware of his lack of greeting. "Watson, I treat you without ceremony. Come in, my dear fellow. What brings you?"

"My wife's insistence." I held up the canvas bag I was carrying. "She is concerned lest you go hungry on Christmas Day."

He laughed as he ushered me inside. "Your wife is too kind, Watson—as are you for coming. A very Merry Christmas. We will drink to the festive day."

I followed him to the familiar rooms and he poured tots of whisky for each of us as I removed my greatcoat.

"Who is your expected visitor?" I inquired.

"A young woman of good sense and comfortable means who lives within a mile of here. She is in the greatest distress, but is tormented by uncertainty. She is spending time on her own while she considers how best to present her problem to me."

"What is her name?"

"I don't know," he replied as he handed me the glass. "I didn't see her."

"You didn't see her? Then how can you know?"

He appeared amused. "You have lunched—or perhaps wined—too well, Watson. The explanation is clearly visible in Baker Street."

"I told you I saw nobody."

"But as you walked up from Marylebone Road, did you not observe footprints preceding you?"

"Yes, but they crossed to the other side and I took no further notice."

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"You should have done. They were very informative." He moved to the window and beckoned me to join him. "About half an hour ago, I came to stand here and noticed those footprints directly opposite, crossing to this door. Unaware of anyone having knocked, I went outside to investigate.

"The footprints begin out of Marylebone Road on the correct side for this address. However, outside the first house where the number is visible, she realised and crossed to the other side. She stood opposite for a few minutes—there are clear indications of her stamping her feet to keep them warm—then summoned up courage to approach. She paused on the step and at one point lifted the knocker—the snow that had settled on it was disturbed. She then withdrew and continued up the street."

"Very well," I agreed. "I cannot dispute the pattern of movement. But how is it a woman, and the other details?"

"The prints were made by new boots sold by Thomson and Weekes. Such footwear is not cheap and is bought by sensible young women who place more importance on quality than fashion. She would not venture out to see me in such weather on Christmas Day unless there was a serious reason, and I would suggest that a mile is the farthest she could walk in such conditions."

"And she is now thinking the matter over?"

"Of course. At the end of Baker Street towards which she has walked lies Regent's Park, an ideal spot to be alone for meditation."

"But will she return?"

"I hope so. She is clearly in urgent need of help, but I can only give it if she overcomes her reservations. . . . Ah." He stepped back from the window, drawing me with him. "This must be she, and her face reveals she has made her resolution. Admit her when she knocks. The presence of a respectable professional man may help to ease her misgivings."

As he spoke, the knocker was struck with some timidity. "Quickly, Watson, or she may flee again!"

I hurried downstairs, mentally composing myself; so nervous a caller needed to be greeted with calm. She was some twenty-three years of age, dressed in an ankle-length tweed coat, the boots Holmes had identified, a smart but practical bonnet, and sensible, fur-lined leather mittens. Her striking grey eyes were troubled as she saw me.

"Mr. Holmes?" she inquired hesitantly.

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"No, I am his colleague, Dr. John Watson," I said. "However, if you will step inside, he is at home."

She shook her head as though regretting what she had managed to accomplish. "I have no appointment and Mr. Holmes is not expecting me."

"He is," I replied. "And is anxious to meet you." I stepped forward and took her arm. "You are in great distress and have come to the best man in England for assistance."

Clearly bewildered, but responding to my assurance, she allowed me to lead her inside and up the stairs. Holmes had prepared a third whisky, smaller than those he had poured for us.

"You must be very cold after walking in the park," he said as she entered. "This will warm you. It has been diluted with water."

"In the park? How can you . . .?" Despite her agitated state, she smiled slightly. "But of course, you are Sherlock Holmes."

"You have not come here to pay me compliments," my friend replied. "I suggest you first sit by the fire and compose yourself."

"Thank you." She took the offered chair, removing her bonnet to reveal long fine hair the colour of wheat coiled into a bun. For a few minutes, we waited in silence until Holmes spoke again.

"You clearly have some familiarity with my methods, so we will accept that from the evidence in the snow of your earlier visit I know this is a matter of urgency. When you are ready, please tell me what it is as briefly as you are able. We might begin with your name."

Our visitor had obviously calmed herself, for she proceeded without further delay. "My name is Anne Fortescue and I am the only daughter of the Reverend Alfred Fortescue, vicar of St. Andrew's Church in St. John's Wood. Do you know it?"

"A baroque building in the style of St. Martin-in-the-Fields," Holmes commented. "I have frequently passed it, but never had occasion to enter. Pray continue."

"It has a small but well-populated parish," Miss Fortescue went on. "My father received the living more than fifteen years ago, after a short curacy in East London, and has always been highly regarded by his flock. Apart from our cook and maid, we live alone, my mother having died when I was less than a year old."

She placed the glass, its contents unfinished, on a table beside her before she continued. "Our lives are, and always have been, unremarkable, and I can think of nothing in the past that could be of any relevance to what occurred last night."

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"When your father would have been occupied with his clerical duties."

"Indeed, and it was at the last—the Watchnight service—that something utterly inexplicable happened."

"Not inexplicable," Holmes corrected. "Extraordinary, perhaps. To you, frightening. But, like all things in this mortal world, it can be explained. That is my business. The details, if you please, and my compliments on the conciseness of your narrative."

"Thank you. . . . The service began at eleven-thirty and was to be a series of lessons and carols with my father conducting the choir. There were some fifty people in the congregation, the numbers being reduced by the weather. The service proceeded without incident until the fifth lesson, which my father was to read. He climbed the steps to the pulpit—I was in the pew directly in front of him, but paying no particular attention—but instead of speaking he looked straight ahead."

Miss Fortescue paused, as though the moment she was describing was so vivid in her mind that it still shook her. She raised her face to Holmes with a look of remembered terror.

"He said nothing! There was just a long silence. To relate it sounds prosaic, but it was totally unnatural. I feared he was taken suddenly ill and rose to go to him. Then he shouted 'No! No! No!' Three times it rang through the church. Then he almost fell back down the pulpit steps and ran—he is not a young man, Mr. Holmes, but he ran—towards the vestry. We were all so startled that for a moment we just stared in disbelief, then I ran myself, followed by others sitting near me.

"The outer door of the vestry leading into the churchyard was open, and as I reached it I saw him racing away through the falling snow. I cried after him and pursued him out and along the road until I lost him in the darkness. No one has seen him since."

Holmes looked at his watch. "And this was nearly fifteen hours ago. Have you consulted the police?"

"One of our local officers was in the congregation and raised the alarm, but in the darkness of a winter's night a man may vanish in London without difficulty. They are searching even now, but I can give them no help as to where he might have fled or what has driven him there. They counsel patience, but remaining in the vicarage unable to do anything was intolerable! Like so many, Mr. Holmes, I have heard of you, but never thought that one day I might come to you myself."

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"You were right to do so now," Holmes told her. "But why did you hesitate when you first arrived?"

"As I walked here, it seemed to me so bizarre an occurrence—with no suggestion of a crime—that I feared you would resent being disturbed on such a matter on such a day. When I first reached your door, my misgivings overcame me. I nearly returned home without seeing you."

"You were right to change your mind," Holmes told her. "As you say, there is no apparent criminality, but the confounding may also concern me, especially when it causes the innocent such distress. At this stage, I have only one question. You mentioned that your father is not a young man. How old is he?"

Miss Fortescue seemed puzzled. "He will be sixty-eight in February."

"Yet he was appointed vicar of St. Andrew's some fifteen years ago, after what you describe as a brief curacy. He must have taken holy orders late in life. What was his profession previously?"

"He was a doctor, Mr. Holmes. A general practitioner."

"And where did he practise?"

"In Liverpool . . . is there any relevance in this?"

"I cannot imagine so," Holmes said dismissively. "The point merely intrigued me. However, we can accomplish nothing here. Watson, you will want to return home, but we are for St. John's Wood."

"I have no commitments," I said. "If this lady has no objection, I should like to accompany you."

"As you wish," Holmes said. "But we leave immediately. The afternoon light will quickly fade. Miss Fortescue, will you be so kind as to wait in the hall downstairs while I attire myself?"

"Of course. I am very grateful to you, Mr. Holmes."

He nodded his thanks, and as our visitor left the room moved swiftly to where he kept his collection of newspaper clippings. They covered, I knew, many years and included narratives of the most recondite events that had caught his attention; on more than one occasion their contents had provided some invaluable fragment of information. He picked up the first volume and turned its pages before pausing for a moment. Then he closed the book and glanced at me.

"Has it ever struck you, Watson, how our existence is constantly governed by chance?"

"What do you mean?"

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"You and I first met at a haphazard point when our lives touched. Years of unrelated movements brought our paths together at that moment. Today is an occasion when such a random pattern has the additional spark of the incredible, what we call a coincidence."

"Then you knew of this matter even before Miss Fortescue arrived?"

"Only in part. Her name immediately struck me. Having ascertained part of her father's history, I am convinced her visit is connected with something that happened more than twenty years ago. I investigated it once, but could not resolve it to my satisfaction. Now, because an obscure curate was offered a living relatively near this house, his daughter has brought it to my attention again."

"And what was the original occurrence?"

"There is no time to explain now," he replied. "We must not keep Miss Fortescue waiting. Do not reveal that I know anything and I will afford you the details when we have the opportunity. Fate has delivered what may prove to be an ominous Christmas present, Watson. That young woman downstairs has sought my help out of a natural and sincere love for her father. I trust she will not live to regret her decision to come to me."

Public-spirited citizens having made efforts to clear the pavements outside their homes, our journey was accomplished more speedily than would otherwise have been the case. St. Andrew's stood back from the road, surrounded by its churchyard, with the vicarage behind, from which Miss Fortescue collected the key while we waited in the portico beneath the Ionic columns of soot-smeared white Portland stone. Inside, it was a handsome square building with a gallery supported by iron pillars round three sides of the nave, the section facing the altar bearing the organ, and rows of box pews. At the chancel steps, Holmes looked back down the flagstones of the central aisle, covered in a deep-blue runner.

"How tall is your father, Miss Fortescue?"

"How tall? I really cannot understand how . . ."

"People are often puzzled when they see my methods in action," he interrupted. "Be so good as to indulge my questions. There is always a purpose to them."

"As you wish. . . . About Dr. Watson's height."

"Very well. Now, your father's exact movements from the moment the service began. I presume he entered from the vestry, which is where?"

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"Over there, to your left. He walked to the chancel steps, bowed to the altar, then crossed to the choir stalls to conduct them for the first carol."

"For which the congregation rose? Thank you. And then?"

"He sat on a chair by the choir as the lessons were read and . . ."

"And remained in that position, except for leading the choir in further carols, until he entered the pulpit to read the fifth lesson," Holmes concluded. "That is perfectly clear. Let us first see if the vestry affords any clues."

The room contained a high cupboard in which the choir's surplices were stored, a desk and chair, and a large padlocked chest for the safekeeping of church plate. Holmes opened the outer door and looked across the gravestones for a moment, then remarked on a pair of rubber overshoes just inside the threshold.

"They are my father's," Miss Fortescue explained. "He wore them as he walked from the vicarage."

"And clearly fled without them," Holmes commented. "Watson, will you wait here with Miss Fortescue for a moment, then enter the church and imitate her father's movements. . . . Incidentally, I noticed a pool of water near the altar. Take care you don't slip."

After he left us, I assured Miss Fortescue that Holmes would not request such a pantomime without good reason before I followed his instructions. There was no sign of him as we reentered the church, but I heard his voice call me from some part of the building.

"First to the choir stalls, then enter the pulpit."

I did as he bade me, finally climbing the nine steps that curved round the oak pulpit and standing before the Bible, set on the outspread wings of a carved eagle. I gazed across the ranks of dark deal pews and saw Holmes sitting in one of them towards the back.

"Oh, there you are," I remarked.

"Yes, Watson . . . where you could not see me until now." He rose and unfastened the brass catch securing the gate at the end of the pew and strode down the aisle. "During the first part of the service, Miss Fortescue, your father would only have been able to see part of his congregation. Even when they rose to sing, his attention would have been directed to the choir. Only when he entered the pulpit and instinctively raised his eyes would everyone have been visible."

"But whom did he see?" she asked.

"That we must discover. You said there were some fifty people in the congregation. Were there any strangers?"

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"Not to my knowledge, but latecomers may have arrived after I took my place."

"Is it the habit of this church to greet worshipers at the door?"

"Yes. My father's curate, David Sinclair, does it."

"Then we must talk to him. Where may he be found?"

"In the curate's cottage in the adjacent road. It is but a short distance."

The "cottage" was imaginatively named, being in fact the end house of a short terrace. Miss Fortescue knocked, and the door was speedily opened by an upright, black-haired young man in clerical garb. His face transmuted into instant relief and his dark eyes lit with affection and concern as he saw our companion.

"Anne!" he cried. "Where have you been? I spent an hour at the vicarage waiting for you to return."

"I have been to seek help, David," she replied. "This is Mr. Sherlock Holmes and his companion, Dr. Watson. Mr. Holmes wishes to talk to you."

"Of course. Gentlemen, this way please."

As we stepped inside, Sinclair placed his hand on Miss Fortescue's arm with such natural familiarity that it was clear their relationship was deeper than that of a young man showing courtesy to his vicar's daughter. In the front room, he set her on a comfortable chair before turning to Holmes.

"Clearly you are aware of what has occurred, sir," he said. "I do not know how I can assist, but if there is anything in my power I shall do it."

"I wish to ascertain if anyone unknown to you attended the Watchnight service. I assume you recognised most of the congregation."

"Yes. Except for a young man and woman who arrived just before the service began."

"Did you speak to them?"

"Hardly at all. With the service about to commence, I wished to take my own seat. I welcomed them and handed them each a service sheet."

"Where did they sit?"

"In a vacant pew near the back. I noticed because I followed them as I went to my place at the front."

"Did you see them again?"

"No. As you may imagine, there was great confusion after the incident with Mr. Fortescue. I was too shocked by what had hap-

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pened even to remember the strangers. It is only now that you have recalled them to my mind. Are they of importance?"

"Almost certainly," Holmes replied. "They appear to have been the only unusual feature present during the service. A connection between them and the vicar's behaviour seems irrefutable."

Sinclair turned to Miss Fortescue with a look of anguish. "But I did not realise! Forgive me for not paying attention to them! Had I done so, perhaps . . ."

"No blame attaches to you," Holmes interrupted. "Many churches are attended by strangers at Christmastime. You were not to know that this man and woman were anything other than seasonal visitors to the parish."

"But now they have disappeared!"

"They are not likely to have travelled far in this weather. It may be possible to locate them."

"My concern is locating my father," Miss Fortescue said.

"We share your anxiety," Holmes said. "And it is possible that the police's activities may have yielded results. If so, they will seek you at the vicarage. Mr. Sinclair may escort you home and leave you in the care of the household staff. We will return to the church."

The possibility, however faint, of the best of news awaiting her at home roused Miss Fortescue to action and we left the curate's house. We separated in the churchyard, with Sinclair assuring us that he would find us if the vicar had returned or the police had information. The late-December light was dying as we passed between the gravestones amid attendant elms and yews, and fresh flakes of snow drifted about us.

"An explanation first, Watson," Holmes said after we had lit several gas mantles in the nave. "I told you earlier that this matter contains echoes of an old story."

We sat in one of the pews, the mantles throwing light and shadow about us as he related his narrative.

"Alfred Fortescue was the son of a distinguished Scottish surgeon. By the 1860s, he was established as a general practitioner in Liverpool. The neighbourhood was one of well-to-do merchants and the practice an advantageous one, but he also held a weekly surgery in the dockside area of the city, asking of his patients no more than they could afford, which in many cases was nothing. In 1866 he married Emily Dawson, the daughter of a shipowner and a woman of volatile temperament who lacked neither ambition nor pride. His comfortable private income was insufficient to satisfy her. She

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complained about the time he spent attending impoverished patients when he could have been attracting high fees from others; she grumbled at what she saw as the paucity of her wardrobe; she resented the modesty of their lifestyle. In short, she became a scold.

"Fortescue refused to abandon the underprivileged, and the couple quarrelled frequently. The arrival of a daughter—the young woman we have met today—might have reconciled their differences, but in fact had the opposite effect. The wife irrationally complained that if her child was to be raised as a ragamuffin, she would have nothing to do with her, and from the time of the birth Fortescue was obliged to employ a nurse. He appointed a woman called Jane Smith, whose arrival aggravated the mother's behaviour to the extent that she became unbalanced in her mind.

"Tragedy struck when the child was six months old. Emily Fortescue had started to wander the house at night, now weeping, now laughing. When they heard her, the staff or Fortescue himself would return her to her room and she would be given a sedative. On Christmas Eve of 1867 the household was awoken by screaming followed by the sound of breaking glass coming from the nursery. Hastening to the room, they found a terrible scene. Jane Smith, whose bedroom was adjacent, was clutching the baby, and Fortescue was standing by the shattered sash window, staring at the terrace below where his wife lay dead from a broken neck.

"The doctor appeared too shaken to speak, but Smith was totally calm. She handed the infant to the cook and asked the butler to summon the police. When they arrived, she confessed to responsibility for Emily Fortescue's death. She said she had heard sounds from the nursery and on entering had seen a figure standing near the cradle. Afraid for the safety of her charge and not recognising the intruder in the darkness, she had run across the room and pushed her violently away. The woman had staggered backwards through the window. Moments later, Fortescue had burst in, followed by the staff. It was a story she never altered, and she was subsequently imprisoned for manslaughter. After her trial, Fortescue left Liverpool with his daughter and was never heard of again.

"The matter attracted scant attention in the London papers, but the provincial press reported it in detail and an acquaintance of mine in Liverpool sent me the cuttings as he felt they would be of interest."

"In what way?" I inquired. "It was a tragedy, but no mystery is apparent."

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"It was to my perceptive correspondent," Holmes replied. "He pointed out that Jane Smith had been one of the doctor's dockside patients, the very class of person his wife had so resented. Fortescue's behaviour marked him as a sympathetic man, so why did he employ someone likely to cause his wife such offence? The question intrigued me also, but other cases drove it from my mind.

"Some ten years later, however, I was engaged on an inquiry in Lancashire and I made a detour to Merseyside before leaving the county. The practice was in the hands of a newcomer, but many people remembered Fortescue, including his former butler, whom I was able to trace. He said that on the night of Mrs. Fortescue's death he had been awoken by raised voices, although he could not be certain from which part of the house they came.

"He rose and left his room, which was on the floor above the nursery. At the foot of the stairs, he heard the scream and the breaking glass and at that moment could see the door to the nursery at the far end of the corridor. He hurried to the room and could recollect no sign of Fortescue until he entered the nursery himself. In other words, Watson, the doctor was in the room at the moment his wife went through the window, a completely different account to that given by Smith."

"Did he give evidence at Smith's trial?" I asked.

"Yes, but made no mention of what he told me. He said that Smith was so adamant in her version of events—a version that condemned her—that he felt he could have been mistaken in the confusion. But even so many years later, he wondered if he had really been in error.

"I used my influence with Scotland Yard to secure an interview with Smith in Holloway Prison. She greeted me courteously, but expressed surprise at my interest. Her story remained unchanged. I put to her an alternative narrative but, rightly suspecting that I had no firm evidence, she denied it. When I left, she asked that I should not approach her again, a request I have honoured."

Holmes stared thoughtfully at the pulpit at the far end of the church. "So is the truth now within my grasp?"

"What was the alternative story you put to Smith?"

"A bow at a venture, Watson, and fatally lacking a reason. It seemed clearly possible that—" He broke off as the creak of the west door opening behind us sounded through the silent church. As we turned in our seats, Sinclair and Miss Fortescue entered, accompanied by a young man, his hat held respectfully in his hands.

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"Mr. Holmes," Sinclair said. "This is one of the strangers who attended the Watchnight service. The lady is his wife. He came to the vicarage to inquire about Mr. Fortescue."

"Indeed?" said Holmes, as we both rose and joined them. "And where is your wife?"

"She is unable to come, sir," the man replied. "But she was concerned and I said I would make inquiries. I'm told he has not returned."

"No, but your interest does you credit," Holmes said as his keen eyes examined the stranger in the light of the gas mantle.

"What is a newly married, left-handed ledger clerk from Manchester doing in St. John's Wood?" he inquired.

"Do you know me, sir?" the man demanded in amazement.

"No, but your accent is unmistakable, the new ring on your wedding finger visible, and it is the elbow of the right sleeve of your jacket that has required repair. That is the one you must lean on your desk while writing with the opposite hand. What is your name?"

"Michael Chester. My wife and I are visiting relatives of hers in London for Christmas."

"And what brought you to St. Andrew's last night?"

"We wished to attend Watchnight service and this was the nearest church."

"And you've never been here before?"

"This is the first time either of us has visited London."

"Do you have any connection with Liverpool?" Holmes asked him.

"My wife's grandmother was born there."

"And your own family?"

"I was raised in an orphanage in the city of Chester, from which I was given my name. I know nothing of my parents."

"For one so disadvantaged, you appear to have advanced yourself."

"I had a benefactor, the wife of a councillor who supported the orphanage. When I showed skill in letters and numbers, she arranged additional education for me and later helped me secure a position with my present employer."

"Most commendable," Holmes commented. "I'm obliged to you for answering my questions. Your attendance last night appears clearly irrelevant to what has happened. Thank your wife for her concern. When Mr. Fortescue returns we will let you know. Where are you staying?"

Chester gave an address nearby and turned to go.

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"One final question," Holmes added. "When were you born?"

"Eighteen sixty-two," he replied. "Why do you wish to know?"

"It's of no consequence. We will contact you when there is news."

Chester closed the west door behind him and Holmes stared at it for a moment until Miss Fortescue spoke.

"You indicated to that young man that my father will return. Are you certain?"

"As I know where he is, yes."

She cried and grasped the lapels of his greatcoat. "In pity's name, take me to him!"

"You have my assurance he is safe." He unclasped her trembling fingers. "I must insist that for the moment you leave this in my hands. You and your father will soon be reunited. In the meantime, return to the rectory and await my arrival. Mr. Sinclair will accompany you."

"You are a cruel man, Mr. Holmes!" she protested.

"That is how it may appear," he agreed. "But you must trust me."

"Come, Anne," said Sinclair. "I am certain we can have faith in Mr. Holmes."

With reluctant obedience, she allowed the curate to lead her out through the west door again. I observed a look of misgiving on Holmes's face as he watched them depart, then he stood for several minutes absorbed in thought.

"Paths again, Watson," he said finally. "After many strange turnings, those that crossed once may cross again. I now know what Fortescue saw when he mounted that pulpit."

"What was it?"

"He saw himself on the night of his wife's death. And now he must face a terrible truth."

After Sinclair had led the distressed Anne Fortescue away, Holmes was silent for a long time and I was not moved to question him. In the sombre light of the nave, his face appeared grave with concern as much as occupied by thought.

"The unravelling of this will cause pain, Watson," he said finally. "But unravelled it must be, even after so long. I am sure I must have the answer, and you will be privy to it. But anything you learn must be treated with the confidence of the confessional."

"Of course," I agreed. "But where is Fortescue, and why did you refuse to take his daughter to him?"

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"Because she must never know the story," he replied. "And, he should be allowed to reappear when he chooses. As to where he is, it was nearly midnight when he fled. Had he gone to the home of one of his parishioners, they would in charity have advised his daughter. A hotel would have been suspicious of the appearance of an elderly vicar arriving in some distress and without luggage and alerted the police. Similarly had he collapsed and been taken to a hospital dead or alive. No public transport is running, so he has not left the area.

"It is obvious that he can only have returned to this church after everyone had left. He entered through the vestry and prayed. When I asked you to imitate his movements during the service, I drew your attention to the pool of water near the altar, the result of snow melting from his shoes."

"But why has he still not revealed himself?"

"He is greatly troubled in his mind and . . ." Holmes stopped abruptly as we heard the sudden clang of a bell, muffled inside the building but clearly audible in the silence. The note was followed by another, then a third, fainter this time. Holmes whirled on his heel, features alert and apprehensive.

"In God's name!" he cried. "Where is the ringing chamber?"

"I'm not certain," I replied. "But I know a similar church which has an entrance by the organ. If we tried the stairs from the lobby . . ."

But Holmes was gone, racing like a man possessed. I hurried after him up the stairs I had suggested. We emerged on the gallery by the organ, next to which was an iron spiral staircase.

"This way!" Holmes cried, and leapt up the steps with the speed of a cat. By the time I reached the door at the top, he was already in the chamber. Suspended from one of the bell ropes was a figure in a long gold and silver chasuble; Holmes had grasped his legs and was lifting the body as best he could to reduce the deadly pressure on the neck.

"The chair, Watson!" he shouted. "Get him down! Quickly!"

I snatched up the chair, then stood on it and began to tug at the simple noose into which the rope had been tied, but the crude knot had tightened. Instinctively, I fumbled in my pocket for the sturdy army knife I invariably carried out of old habit, snapped open the blade, and cut the rope.

"I have him!" Holmes cried, and let the vicar's body slide through his arms until he could lift it like a child's and carry him to a wooden

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bench alongside the wall. I felt for a pulse; the beat beneath the skin of the wrist was as faint and irregular as the flutter of a butterfly's wing and the flesh around his thin lips was livid blue.

"He is not long for this world," I said. "He is bitterly cold, and now this. . . ."

"Then may Heaven forgive me for such folly!" Holmes exclaimed. "I had assumed he would have found warmth as well as shelter."

He undid the knot and gently lifted the rope clear, then removed his coat and wrapped it around the vicar. Fortescue's grey eyes opened and his lips moved as he croaked an attempt at speech.

"Rest yourself," Holmes told him. "You may talk later."

"He has very little time left in which to speak," I said. "Perhaps it will be better if he does so while he can."

"Yes," Fortescue whispered. "Mr. Holmes, you must be my confessor."

"I can grant no absolution."

"Then your understanding will be the best I can hope for. How much do you know, sir?"

"Much, but there are gaps in my knowledge. Can you answer my questions?" Fortescue nodded. "How much did you hear of our conversation in the church?"

"Not all, but enough. When I heard voices, I crept into the organ loft, still lacking the courage to return. You must know that until I heard what you said this had been no more than an insane nightmare. When you said I had to face a terrible truth, I knew what it must be."

"But I am still uncertain of parts of that truth," Holmes told him. "Where did you meet Jane Smith?"

Fortescue's face darkened, but he looked Holmes straight in the eyes. "On the Liverpool dockside. She was standing alone beneath a riverside lamp. I knew what she was because I was seeking one. A young man is taught to temper his desires, but it is not always possible. After that first encounter, I visited her regularly, during which time I began to have affection for her, although our relationship could never be more than what it was. Then she left Liverpool without explanation and I neither saw nor heard of her again for some two years.

"She returned as a patient at my dockside surgery shortly after I had married. I was dismayed that she still followed the same sordid profession, but she pointed out she had no choice. While intelligent, she was poor, ill-educated, and without advantages. Her only skill,

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she said, was that of tending to young children; as the eldest daughter of a large family, she had been obliged to undertake the care of younger brothers and sisters.

"When my wife refused to accept Anne, I realised I could offer Jane respectable employment. You must believe me when I tell you there was no impropriety while she was under my roof."

"But her appointment offended your wife," Holmes remarked.

"I paid no regard to that. Emily had proved a bad wife and would be a worse mother; she would have resented whomsoever I had engaged. Jane was excellent at her duties, attentive and gentle to my daughter. That was all that mattered to me."

"And the night your wife died," Holmes said. "Tell me if the theory Jane Smith rejected when I put it to her was correct. Your wife had become dangerously unbalanced. That night she entered the nursery and in some manner threatened her child. Awakened by the disturbance, you went into the room and saw what was happening. Having ensured your daughter's safety, you attempted to calm your wife, but she was too agitated. In the struggle, she fell through the window to her death."

Fortescue shook his head. "You are too charitable, Mr. Holmes. I deliberately forced my wife through that window. She had threatened to kill our child and would try again. Before the police arrived, Jane spoke to me. She said the truth would leave Anne parentless and insisted she must take the blame. If I supported her story that Emily's death was a tragedy caused by her protecting Anne, there was a chance she would not hang. To save myself, I placed her life in peril. Although she escaped the executioner, I have never been able to escape my conscience. I entered the church as a form of penance."

Holmes looked at me. "You understand now why I said certain things must never be revealed, especially to Miss Fortescue."

"Indeed," I said, then turned to the vicar. "But why did you attempt to take your life?"

"Mr. Holmes knows that," he replied.

"Yes," my friend agreed. "Had I realised you were listening, there were things I would not have said. It was very stupid of me."

"It does not matter now. I . . ." The vicar's breath caught painfully in his throat and I felt for the pulse again, then shook my head at Holmes's inquiring and anxious glance.

"You must . . ." Fortescue's voice was fading, "protect her as you have promised, Mr. Holmes. I lied for the wrong reasons, but you

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must do so for the right ones. Condemn me only in your secret heart and let God . . ." He was gone, and Holmes looked at him with a great sadness.

"There were three principals in this tragedy, Watson," he said. "A wealthy doctor, a proud woman, and a common prostitute. And the meanest of them was the noblest."

"She is to be admired for taking the blame," I admitted. "And one hardly expects self-sacrifice from a woman of the streets."

"You display the prejudices of our age, Watson. Can't you see the full extent of her sacrifice?"

"I acknowledge she sacrificed her freedom and . . ."

"Damn it, man!" Holmes cried. "She did infinitely more than that. She sacrificed her child!"

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"You rarely do!" Holmes cried in a great passion and whirled away. He stood for several moments with his back to me before speaking again. "Forgive me, Watson. Your long loyalty deserves better, but this is a wretched business. Michael Chester is Jane Smith's son. The son who has grown to manhood while his mother has been incarcerated for a crime she did not commit. And when I saw the greyness in his eyes that is echoed in those of Anne Fortescue, I knew who his father must be."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Yes. The vicar of St. Andrew's, whose flock would condemn Jane Smith as shameful. He didn't know because she never told him. But last night, the anniversary of a tragedy he can never have forgotten, he looked across the pews of this church and saw a face so like his own as a younger man that he fled in terror. Then he overheard my conversation with Michael Chester and began to guess the truth; he knew it when Chester told me when he had been born—the period during which Jane Smith was away from Liverpool. At that moment he recognised how much she had sacrificed, and a lifetime of remorse became too much to bear."

"And what will you tell Miss Fortescue—and Michael Chester?"

"Michael Chester and his wife need know nothing, least of all that their chance attendance at this church led to his father's death. We shall tell them that the vicar perished in the cold and his actions are inexplicable. They will leave London none the wiser and continue with their lives. As for Miss Fortescue . . . it's possible an inquest might not detect that a rope had been about her father's neck?"

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I stooped and pulled the high embroidered collar of the chasuble away from the flesh; there were faint marks, but the thick material had protected him and he had hanged for but a few moments.

"Unless a doctor was looking for them, they would probably be overlooked," I said.

"Then better some think I have failed than the truth be known," Holmes said. "Help me bear him into the churchyard, where it may be supposed that he died from the cold."

Darkness had fallen and there was little danger of our being seen as we carried our burden. We laid him between two rows of gravestones, then hastened to the vicarage and said we had found him. Miss Fortescue was too distraught to pay attention when Holmes expressed regret at being mistaken in all his reasonings, and we left her in the care of Sinclair and her staff. On leaving the vicarage we visited the house where Michael Chester and his wife were staying; they were dismayed and saddened at what we told them and we left them in happy ignorance.

"There is one final matter," Holmes said as we returned to Baker Street. "I shall write to Jane Smith and request that she will see me again. She is the only person who can answer what questions are left."

I accompanied Holmes for the encounter at Holloway. Jane Smith bore the marks of long imprisonment, but retained the looks of a striking woman. When the wardress who escorted her to us had left, she reached into the pocket of her prison gown and produced Holmes's letter.

"Is my son a good man, Mr. Holmes?" she asked.

"That was my impression. And with a kind-hearted wife."

"I am pleased. When you visited me some years ago, I refused to answer your questions but I am prepared to do so now."

Holmes nodded his appreciation. "Why did you protect Alfred Fortescue?"

"For the same reason any woman would protect a man, whatever he had done. Because I loved him." She saw the expression on my face and smiled. "Yes, Dr. Watson. Such feelings are not expected among women of my profession, but they are possible. After we first met, he was kind and considerate, and had our situations been different we might have married. But we both knew that was impossible.

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"It was through me that he learnt of the deprivations my sort of people suffer and it was because of what I told him that he opened his charitable surgery. Our relationship continued—for true affection, doctor—until I knew I was with child. I could have demanded that he support me, but knew that if the truth ever emerged he would be ruined. I left Liverpool, bore my son, and placed him in an orphanage as I was unable to raise him myself. When I returned to the city, Alfred had married and later employed me.

"His wife was intolerable, and on the night of her death entered the nursery and threatened to kill her own daughter. When Alfred murdered her, I immediately knew what I had to do. He protested, but he was always a man I could persuade." She looked down at the letter again. "You say you have protected Anne from the truth of this, for which I am grateful. She was not in my care for long, but I loved her."

"I understand from the governor that you will be released soon," Holmes said. "I could assist you to trace your son."

Jane Smith shook her head. "I abandoned him, Mr. Holmes. I have no right to reappear in his life after so long."

"What will you do?"

She smiled at both of us grimly. "I shall return to the streets, Mr. Holmes. Apart from the few months I was Anne Fortescue's nurse, that is all society holds me worthy of."

"I cannot allow that," Holmes protested. "Dr. Watson and I have influential friends who would assist you."

"Many of your friends, sir, are the sort of men who will have only one interest in me," she replied. "I know a side of their respectable lives of which you gentlemen are ignorant."

"Nonetheless, you must approach me on your release."

"Thank you, but I doubt that I shall." She rose from the wooden chair on which she had been sitting. "I must now return to my cell."

Holmes had stood up with her. "I deem it an honour to have met you, Miss Smith," he said.

She bowed her head in acknowledgement and was led away.

"You cannot add this case to your chronicles, Watson," Holmes remarked. "Fortescue's crime must remain unpublished for his daughter's sake—and of course your polite readers would be grossly offended at being asked to admire one they are taught to despise. But it is a pity that so remarkable a woman should be forgotten."

As I write, I am an old man and our society is much changed since the case of The Ghost of Christmas Past, now for the worse, now for

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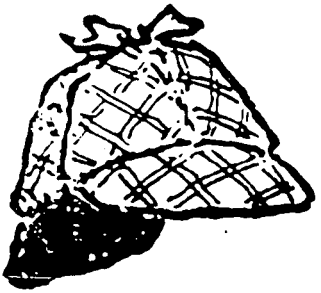
the better. Later in this twentieth century, Holmes's admiration may be accepted and shared. Anne Fortescue married David Sinclair, who became an archdeacon; she recently died an honoured and beloved woman in the diocese. Jane Smith was beaten to death in an alleyway in Cheapside, and Holmes counted it one of his greatest regrets that he was never able to identify her murderer. At his expense, she was buried in a Sussex churchyard. He and I were the only mourners.



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

British novelist and former *Punch* editor Peter Dickinson is one of the half-dozen or so best writers of detective fiction currently active, maybe even *the* best. But he is no threat to make the bestseller lists, nor has he ever quite achieved the acclaim due him, at least in the United States. There are several reasons for this.

Though he introduced Scotland Yard Superintendent James Pibble in his first novel *Skin Deep* (1968; American title *The Glass-Sided Ants' Nest*) and returned to the character in several subsequent novels, Dickinson has usually not employed series characters, while displaying an admirable if commercially dubious determination never to write the same book twice. More significantly, Dickinson demands a more careful and attentive reading than some readers are willing to devote to escape fiction. In his latest book, returning to his favorite theme of past traumatic events recalled many years later, he has set himself an even greater technical challenge than usual.

***** Peter Dickinson, *The Yellow Room Conspiracy,* Mysterious, $18.95. Aging lovers Paul Ackerley and Lady Seddon, she one of the five famous Vereker sisters (not really, we are told, so much like the Mitfords), recall in alternate chapters events beginning in the thirties and leading up to locked-room murder and government scandal in 1956. This is an astonishing novel, written with its author's usual elegant style and unerring sense of place, period, and character. It also has a formal puzzle with several alternate solutions, and readers will not all agree on which of them Dickinson believes is the correct one.

**** Dorothy Cannell: *How to Murder Your Mother-in-Law,* Bantam, $19.95. Despite the title and the jacket copy's promises, an actual crime occurs so late in the going (page 218 out of 261) that one might suspect the author and publisher of disguising a pure comic novel as a mystery. But the first-person narrative of British housewife Ellie Haskell, whose well-meaning idea of hosting a wedding anniversary dinner for her husband's parents sets off a series of farcical mishaps and misunderstandings, is so funny that even some purists may forget to complain—and Cannell does eventually deliver a genuine whodunit. The author is probably the greatist humorist of the Malice Domestic school of mystery; the quoted comparison to P.G. Wodehouse (by Nancy Pickard) is not far from the mark.

**** George P. Pelecanos: *Shoedog,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Apart from his talent and professionalism, Pelecanos is as different from Dickinson

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and Cannell as could be imagined. His medium-sized caper novel concerns an interestingly assorted group of criminals, most participating because the boss has something on them, and their meticulously-planned effort to knock over two Washington D.C. liquor stores the same day for a take of about $300,000. Reminiscent of the works of writers like Jim Thompson and Lionel White, the book would be right at home with the sexy cover and yellow spine of a 1950s Gold Medal original. Even the length is right, an economical 200 pages of classy, suspenseful prose. Few books in the current market are as genuinely hardboiled as this one. The story is a natural choice for adaptation to a contemporary *film noir,* which will be better if the filmmakers resist the temptation to step up the action and violence and concentrate on the gallery of well-drawn characters.

**** Peter Robinson: *Wednesday's Child,* Scribners, $20. Chief Inspector Alan Banks and his fellow Yorkshire cops search for a seven-year-old girl abducted from her home by a couple who claim to be social workers investigating an abuse accusation. This is police procedural writing at its best, achieving the illusion the reader is following a real investigation rather than a contrived one. The absorbing account has some of the step-by-step fascination of Hillary Waugh's classic *Last Seen Wearing* (1951), though it doesn't share that book's semi-documentary style. Robinson, a Yorkshire-born Canadian, is one of the key figures in his adopted country's mystery renaissance.

*** Gail Bowen: *The Wandering Soul Murders,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Another book from north of the border also achieves a feeling of reality, if in a different way and only up to a point. The second novel about university teacher and widowed mother Joanne Kilbourn is steeped in Canadian culture, even getting in plugs for several presumably non-fictional Saskatchewan artists. The plot, concerning a series of prostitute murders and a mysterious death closer to Joanne's own family, is sneakily involving, and Bowen makes the reader care about her characters. On the debit side, the climax is set up by some incredible stupidity on Joanne's part, even allowing that she doesn't know she's a character in a suspense novel. Biggest barriers to this worthy novel reaching its deserved audience are an uninspired title and an unappealing dust jacket.

Janet Hutchings gathers historical mysteries from *EQMM* in *Once Upon a Crime* (St. Martin's, $19.95), a title borrowed from the establishment of Minneapolis book dealer Steve Stilwell. Periods range from the first-century-B.C. Rome of Steven Saylor's Gordianus the Finder to the 1930s small-town America of Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Other series characters represented include Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael, Lillian de la Torre's Dr. Sam: Johnson, and James Powell's Ambrose Ganelon. One of the older stories (and one of the best) is the classic "Chinoiserie" by Helen McCloy, one

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of the great American writers of formal detection.

Among the collections drawing on both *EQMM* and *AHMM*, Cynthia Manson has edited *Women of Mystery II* (Carroll & Graf, $21.95) and *Death on the Veranda: Mystery Stories of the South* (Carroll & Graf, $19.95), the latter of which has as distinguished a trio of heavy hitters as have ever led off a mystery anthology: Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, and Eudora Welty.

The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1994 (Walker, $21.95), the latest in Hoch's long-running annual series, has five stories from *EQMM* and one each from stablemates *AHMM* and *Louis L'Amour Western Magazine* among its dozen selections; the 24-page yearbook section is more impressive than ever, indispensable to the serious mystery buff.

In *The Mammoth Book of Golden Age Detective Stories* (Carroll & Graf, $9.95), the great era referred to is not the usual novel-dominated '20s and '30s but rather the Victorian and Edwardian period editor Marie Smith believes was the Golden Age of the detective short story. The editor looks for lesser-known tales rather than anthological favorites and includes among the 500-page volume's twenty-two selections some short novels and long short stories originally published as separate books: Anna Katherine Green's *The Doctor, His Wife and the Clock*, Richard Harding Davis's *In the Fog*, Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men*, and Jacques Futrelle's *The Diamond Master*. The last-named, by the author of the Thinking Machine Stories, is perhaps the most welcome surprise; I doubt it has been in print very often since its original publication in 1909. Though the volume begins and ends with familiar Sherlock Holmes stories, the selections by writers like Israel Zangwill, Victor L. Whitechurch, Arthur B. Reeve, R. Austin Freeman, Ernest Bramah, and Melville Davisson Post tend not to be the ones most often chosen to represent them.

Among the reprints is a handsome new trade paperback edition of Paul Cain's hardboiled classic, *Fast One* (Vintage, $9), first published in 1933. The same publisher offers at the same price Cain's very scarce 1946 short story collection *Seven Slayers*, bringing back into print virtually the entire output of a somewhat mysterious figure who was born George Carol Syms and wrote screenplays as Peter Ruric. One of the best of Tony Hillerman's Navajo detective novels, 1978's *Listening Woman*, has been reprinted in hardcover in the Armchair Detective Mystery Library series (Penzler, $22), including a genuinely informative new introduction by the author. Latest in another Penzler series is a paperback edition of Ellery Queen's 1931 hospital mystery, *The Dutch Shoe Mystery* ($6.95), a prime example of the puzzle-spinner's art—and I don't use the word art lightly.

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Michigan writer Michael Norton is a newcomer to the crime field but you'd never guess it: His mastery of the P.I. shtick is as smooth as the kind of sax his narrator, Scotty Dyer, would like to play. Mr. Norton is the author of two horror novels and currently has a private-eye novel in the works . . .

CHARLIE ONE-EYE

by MICHAEL C. NORTON

My best friend these five years past has been Charlie One-Eye. Me, I'm Scotty Dyer, private investigator.

Don't believe it. I'm an out-of-work sax-man living off the Michigan Employment Security Commission. Charlie One-Eye? Wino, pure and simple. Guy says he's an Arapahoe, an Indian, y'know? But I figure him for just an old Jew drunk. Salt-and-pepper hair in long braids that dangle down his chicken-chest. Wears an old doeskin fringed shirt he cadged from Salvies. About half the fringe is gone. Looks like a brown-yellow smile on a heavy smoker missing many teeth; the kind of geek with nothing to smile about but does it anyway just to disgust the gentry. Guy like most of the street fixtures down here on The Cass, in the heart of Motown.

"Get off it," I say when he's rantin' 'bout the white man snatchin' his native land, how Detroit belonged to his Indian brothers. "Charlie, whoever saw an Indian with wavy hair? Indians have names like Running Deer or Lone Wolf," I say. "What self-respecting clan would take on a name like One-Eye?" Then he mumbles about white devils, meaning me.

In the long run, his take on reality probably isn't that much shakier than mine, so he's the person I hang with between trips to the M.E.S.C. offices for my belittlement sessions with red-tape clerics and dropping by the American Federation of Musicians Local trying for pickup gigs with bar bands short a horn man.

The private eye shtick? I grew up with it. Richard Diamond. The Brannigan Brothers. Boston Blackie and the Whistler on TV. Just my fantasy. Me: guy in a trench coat in the grey, cold city, creature

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of the night, the bars, the seedy side. Cigarette jutting from a corner of a cruel hard mouth. Just make-believe, like Charlie One-Eye figuring he's a disenfranchised Indian.

Until the other night. Charlie and I were in a bar with no name on The Cass. Guy couldn't afford a sign. If it weren't for the illegal Michigan Lotto competition he ran for the bent-nose boys, he couldn't have afforded to open his doors. Lots of on-the-cuff action for the alkies on The Cass. Guy with a heart of gold. Figured alkies weren't dependent personalities, just self-medicating manic-depressives. Read it somewhere. Or took a night course in psych at Wayne State once. Doesn't matter. Point is, he ran a place where a one-eyed Jew and an unemployed sax man with a P.I. jones could hang and get a little buzzed.

I was hanging and buzzed that Thursday. It was somewhere between two A.M. and eternity, that part of a Detroit night that seems endless, when bars the law cares about stop serving and boot the better-class drunks into the night so they can mow down pedestrians with their Lincoln Town Cars. Guy with the heart of gold who operated the No-Name Bar figured it was the time of night when the self-medicating folk needed the heaviest doses.

I still had M.E.S.C. money, so I was buying for a few nearby strangers. After a while, Charlie One-Eye staggered in from wherever to commune in his noncommunicative fake-Indian way, which was to grunt occasionally. Guy that ran the place brought Charlie his Four Roses and my three fingers of Dr. Beam when the twit in the Redwood and Ross boat captain's blazer stumbled in at the open front door, small-bore pearl-handled revolver in his dilettante paw, shot dead a bottle of Old Crow behind the bar, and fell face down on the greasy vinyl-asbestos tile.

Guy that runs the bar, Charlie and I at the closest table, and the assorted bag ladies, longtime laid-off autoworkers, and simple-minded degenerate winos sat and stared. First thought in all our minds was: what a pathetic waste of Old Crow, running down the shelves like thin brown blood or dirty antifreeze, depending on your point of view.

I'm the guy who gets up, nearly stumbling over Fred, my sax, my constant companion, my Tonto, patient and silent in his battered black case by my chair. Fred was thinking, oh no, here we go. He's gonna do his Scotty Dyer, P.I. jazz.

And I did. I crouched over the body, staring at it like I knew something, which in this case, I did. What I knew was, this dude

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was gone, gone, gone. Dead. Definitely ex. I told the audience what my keen analytic mind had deduced. The reaction was a collective shrug. Most of the patrons were still grieving the Old Crow, considering pallbearers and eulogies. None of them saw the opportunity here, as I did, to make like foxy old Sherlock. In a smattering of minutes, the others had decided to take even the death of the Old Crow bottle in stride and were back nursing the booze in front of them, leaving me to my crime and detection thing. Charlie One-Eye came over to crouch with me, because that's what people you hang with do.

I pulled the dude's red-painted wallet. As I shuffled through the various gold cards and crisp engraved portraits of dead presidents, I entertained fleeting illicit thoughts.

"You can't take them," I told myself.

"Why not?" somebody in my head asked in return.

"The heat will want to know why a guy like this was wandering around without a hundred or two in pocket change and his plastic."

"One-fifty," the voice said, "and I still say why not? How do you know the cops don't clean the bodies before they call the meat wagon?"

Now there was a good point. People on The Cass don't have a lot of respect for cops' morals. Myself being no exception. I'd been rousted and rolled a few times by cops. At least I figured it that way when I sobered up in the slam, bruised and flat broke. Easier than admitting I'd blown all the free money the state gave me on a cheap-liquor buzz.

"White devil think right way for a change," Charlie surprised me by saying. "Cops make heap-big trouble if we roll dead man."

"Thanks for the guidance, Charlie, but cut the redskin jive. Just let me think."

I had lots of time for that. No one was in a rush to call the heat, tell them some dude from the 'burbs wandered into the No-Name, murdered a fifth of whiskey, then fell over dead.

There was a hole in the dude's belly, liver side, small, leaking red paint on his single-needle-stitched shirt. The bitsy revolver could've done it, but I'm no expert. I figured the stain was big enough to say he bled to death. There had to be damage to a necessary organ or two in there somewhere, fatal, but not immediate. He had staggered into the No-Name under his own steam, after all.

Question for the P.I. I wished I was: from whence had the dude staggered? Was there a late-model T-Bird or Cougar parked out

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there on The Cass? If there was, it was gone, gone, gone by now, stripped and sold for parts in East Detroit or Highland Park. The one sure thing: dude hadn't come gunning for Old Crow. Handguns are meant to make human beings do like the whiskey bottle had.

I'm no psychologist, but from giggin' in seedy bars most of my adult life, I know types, and the two cops that sauntered into the No-Name about dawn were of a type. They'd done high school, hit the academy, and bingo! Add blue twill, a nickeled S&W .357, spit-polished brogans, and a fifty-pound bad attitude, and there you go. Career cops who do nothing but crab about the hours, carp about the danger, but pray for a chance to draw their piece, to use it.

These two wanted nothing more than to empty their revolvers, speed-load, play another chorus of the S&W tarantella, and just grin, grin, grin as The Cass Corridor human debris decorated the No-Name's walls à la Jackson Pollock. I could see it in their narrowed eyes, the curl of their upper lips. Like twin Elvises smellin' the stables at Graceland on a muggy day.

"Anybody here know the stiff?" the best candidate for older and more surly of the two snarled.

Nobody did. The stiff coulda been the pope and nobody would've said boo to the cops. Street people have nothing to talk about with cops. Not ever.

Surly-boy's partner went around the room with a pocket pad takin' names. "He took my brother's name, and my brother died in pain, there's a man goin' 'round, takin' names"—a lyric I remembered from when I listened to folk music. Surly-boy called the meat wagon.

After the body-bag boys and cops cleared out—lots of narrowed eyes, lots of curled Elvis lips—No-Name Bar's owner kicked our sorry butts out into the summer Michigan dawn, bright as the Apocalypse, chilled like a 7-Eleven bottle of Mad Dog, a shock to the system after a night on The Cass, the womb-dark innards of all the No-Name Bars.

I shaded bloodshot road-map eyes with both hands, Fred silent and waiting in the dark of his sax case at my feet like a ventriloquist's dummy. I could see that Charlie One-Eye was spooked. Had he been a real Arapahoe, he would've been gettin' down with the Ghost Dance Boogaloo, preparing himself to join his ancestors.

"Hey, Charlie. You seem to be bummin', man."

Old Charlie just squinted his one good eye, shook his head, wrapped his snaggletoothed fringed arms around his emaciated wino's body, and said nothing. I should have known better, but I

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was having a rare attack of concern for my fellow man.

"You don't look so good, man. Need somethin'?" A trip to the 7-Eleven. A little MD 20/20, I figured. I was still flush with free cash. Call me a philanthropist.

"Not now. Later, maybe. Yeah, later. . . . Somethin' I'm gonna need you for."

No phony Indian lingo. Scary. Radical. But I shrugged it off. I may be philanthropic sometimes, but Scotty Dyer's no nag. I ambled away with Fred, the sax, left Charlie One-Eye shivering outside the No-Name, waiting, it seemed, for the sun to make him as warm on the outside as his all-night drinking kept him inside. Me? The look in his one good eye chilled me worse than any dawn wind of the Detroit River.

I went to the one-room flop I call home when I can afford the rent or at least jimmy the latest lock put on by the absentee landlord, spent some time polishing Fred and checking his key action. Unlike women or other humans, Fred could be kept happy without much energy or skill. As the alcohol haze faded, hunger came. Down to the 7-Eleven for some microwave burritos and a Guzzler, enough sticky-sweet liquid to float the Detroit Yacht Club downriver all the way to Flat Rock.

I hopped a bus to the elevated People Mover, rode that to Hart Plaza where I watched the morning people, the dirty sea gulls raiding trash bins; soaked up sun. If time has to pass you by, it may as well be on a sunny day. Sometimes, being a people watcher is all the communion you need. The only thing missing was Fred, sleeping back at my flop. I would've liked hearing his sun and sea gull song down by the river. Then again, a particular character flaw of Fred and most other saxophones is a tendency to turn sad on you. Fred might have sung a sad song despite the sunshine because of the worry I couldn't shake over the spooky look in Charlie's one good eye and my troubled thinking about the stiff who came a-calling at the No-Name with a revolver and a contract out on a bottle of whiskey.

Around midmorning, I got up the nerve to do the slow shuffle to the cop shop nearest The Cass.

Guy at the desk could've been a line-rat from Ford or GM. He had that look, the Detroit attitude that a job's a job, a place you had to be while the clock ticked away your life.

"Had a stiff hauled out of a bar on The Cass early this morning. What do you know about it?"

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"Who's askin'?"

"A concerned citizen," I offered.

"No such thing anywhere near The Cass, bud."

"I was in the bar. Watched the guy drop dead. I'm a concerned citizen."

"Big deal. I've seen fifty-sixty guys drop dead. Didn't make me wanna start a scrapbook."

"It's my watering hole, get it? I got a right to know if it's gonna become a nightly floor show."

He shuffled some papers, settled on a sloppily typed sheet of bond paper, looked at it a minute.

"Not much chance of guys like him wandering around on The Cass too often. Guy was uppercrust. One Abraham Lipschitz. Owned Jefferson Steel. Loaded. Just found his Mercedes on Tireman, stripped and burned out, 'bout an hour ago."

I already knew the name from his ID; knew he was loaded from his clothes. So far the cop wasn't a source of startling information. I'd predicted the fate of the car. Amateurs joy-rode it, stripped the portable, saleable parts, set the carcass on fire to slow ID and erase fingerprints.

"So who did the dirty deed?"

"Do I look like Sherlock freakin' Holmes? Investigation is ongoing, like the commissioner tells the news guys. My advice? Read about it in the papers, bud, and if you're worried about crime reoccurring in a bar on The Cass? I can guaran-freakin'-tee it."

"Thanks. Always gratifying to see tax dollars wisely spent on the salaries of such perceptive officers."

He gave me the once-over. "Yeah? Next time you pay any taxes, bud, stop by again and maybe I'll be more smiley-faced for ya."

I left. The sun was too hot, too bright. Maybe this P.I. gig wasn't all the TV shows made it out to be. I walked back to The Cass. I ambled around the corner into the dark of the No-Name Bar. Guy behind the bar and me, that was it. Guy brought over a bottle of good stuff and sat with me. We tossed the bull about those damn Detroit Tigers, that damn mayor, and this damn heat. We artfully avoided any discussion of Abraham Lipschitz and the dark spot he had left on the vinyl-asbestos as a forget-me-not.

Early afternoon, I was still damning the heat but getting really tired of hearing about the mayor and the Tigers. Guy who owned the No-Name kept at 'em both. On and on. I drank with him, putting up with it awhile longer, then strolled to my third-floor flop, show-

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ered in brown water, and went to bed. I worried about not seeing Charlie One-Eye, but the booze made it easy for sleep to slide over me.

The knock on the door came less than an hour later. Nasty timing. The knocking persisted, and somehow I got to the door in my jockeys.

Couldn't place the guy at first, though I should have. Three-piece suit made to fit a younger, more robust man, but still pretty sharp-looking, tailored. Polished wing-tips, clean fingernails. The big clues that finally cinched an ID were salt-and-pepper wavy hair, though it was short, nicely trimmed, and a neat little black patch over the right eye. It was Charlie. I could see now I had been right to worry. Aliens had come in the dead of night to transmute old winos into Harvard Business School graduates.

"May I come in, Scotty?"

May I? As much of a shock as the get-up. I'd never known old Charlie One-Eye to use correct grammar, or speak two words without cussing.

"Sure, sure Charlie, come on in. It is Charlie, isn't it? What's the deal, did Salvie's get in a shipment from Grosse Pointe?"

He sat down in my one chair, a World War Two veteran with lots of shrapnel wounds, stuffing-guts hanging.

"Scotty, I have a story to tell, and a very big favor to ask."

I got back into bed. "Speak, man." I leaned back and lit up a smoke.

It was a long story, filled with digressions and cul-de-sacs, a jazz solo by Coltrane played backward and sideways. The New Improved Charlie One-Eye fumbled, fidgeted, but mostly shook and made no sense. He was sobering up, a process his body was not willing to accept without a fight. ". . . and so, you see, the man who died in the bar . . . Abe Lipschitz is—was—my younger brother."

I lit my tenth coffin nail.

"So, Mr. Lipschitz. That tells me nothing. Oh, you've told me about your wealthy beginnings, your family mansion in Birmingham, about your anthropological study of Indian cultures at various universities; even about your ending up on The Cass, though you lost me somewhere on the 'why.' What you haven't told me is why the suit, the whole new shtick?"

"I have to go see Rosa, Abe's wife. And I need you to go along." He wrung his old hands like a dishrag. "I need you to keep me off the juice long enough to do it . . . with some kind of . . . dignity."

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"Like I'm the freakin' A.A.?" I said that, all right, but I knew what he meant. That's why we were here, all of us down on The Cass. It all had to do with dignity. None of us—not one—had any. There was even a word for it: disenfranchised.

"Scotty," the old man was saying, "I need you to go because you're my friend."

Any reply would have sounded either too sarcastic or too maudlin. I dressed, finding clean clothes: shirt, tie, slacks, and sports jacket I'd been saving for an upscale gig at one of the posh 'burbs joints, a gig that was about as likely to come my way as sax chops like Lenny Pickett's, but Fred and I can dream, can't we?

I sprung for a cab, with part of what remained of my last M.E.S.C. check. Guy didn't stand a chance of getting a tip and he knew it, so he took his time. Not easy on Detroit freeways, where even the slomos do seventy to eighty.

Birmingham. Northern suburb. About as far north as you can get without running into Pontiac, the city named for the car or vice versa. Maybe for the Indian chief, but nobody remembers that. Birmingham. Posh City.

The house—I use that term like a landlubber calling the Royal Princess a boat—sat on enough land to qualify as a third-world country. And took up most of it, sprawling out in various wings and solariums.

A small Hispanic-looking woman in a penguinesque maid's outfit came to the door. She gave us the Tia Juana once-over, sniffed disapprovingly at my clothes, my shaggy hair, and at the departing cab. No limo, just a downtown cab. Meant we didn't belong here, and what's more, she couldn't get rid of us without waiting for another cab.

Charlie had the shakes really bad, and though I don't consider myself that deeply immersed in the bottle, I was pretty jumpy, too. Contagion. I heard Charlie mumble something, and the maid's pudgy brown face folded in on itself like a baking apple in a hot oven, disgust and condescension mixed into one expression. She led us inside.

It was like TV. I could almost hear that pudgy English guy with the loud grating voice welcoming us to the Lifestyles of the Rich and Whatever. It was the kind of place most of us only see on TV, and that's all the reality it held for me. You go "wow" as the camera pans over chandeliers big as Cadillacs, rugs thick as Elvis's pompadour, antique furniture older than Moses. And that's watching it on

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TV. In person, I just put my hands behind my back so no one could accuse me of touching, breaking, or stealing anything.

The maid took us to a room so far from the front door my legs were shaking from the walk. I could've used a stiff drink.

Books climbed three walls, floor to ceiling. The fourth wall, behind a massive oak desk, was all leaded-glass French doors opening on a terrace that descended into manicured fields of fountains and shrubs trimmed as precisely as an auto-industry dowager's coiffure, ending, finally, in dense woods to seal off contact with the outside world.

There was a woman seated behind the desk, dressed in black, silver-blue hair recently arranged by some light-loafered guy who called himself Mr. Something or Other European-sounding, and who charged by the hair strand.

She smiled rather weakly, I thought, and stood behind the barrier of the desk. "Charles. Good of you to come."

She meant Charlie One-Eye. Had to be. My name wasn't Charles. Even cleaned up, with the haircut and spiffy suit, he was Charlie One-Eye to me. But he answered to the name, went to her, leaned over the desk, and clasped her hands in both of his.

"Rosa," he said, voice quavering. "How have you been?"

She shrugged narrow shoulders and sighed eloquently. "I've had better days than this one, I can tell you."

Charlie nodded, his head a bit wobbly. "Abe—is—has been good to you, these past years?"

Another shrug. "Who could complain? And you know Abe. Complaining made him surly. He never cared for upset."

Charlie grunted. Almost like his old pretend-Indian self. "Yes. I remember too well."

"Oh, Charles, I didn't mean to . . . Would you like a drink? Napoleon brandy, as I recall." She had to wrench her hands out of his grip, but she did it with grace. Charlie lowered his hands to lean over the desk. He stood like that to keep from shaking. The woman flashed a nervous smile at me as she made for a shelf of books. The shelf rose with a touch of her fingertips, some magic of hydraulics, and crystal decanters with matching glasses came into view.

"Something for you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Dyer. Scotty Dyer. A friend of Charlie's. I assume you are Abraham Lipschitz's widow?"

She made a sweeping gesture of inquiry over the array of bottles, a wordless, impatient repeat of her question.

"Oh," I said. "Whatever. Scotch, I guess."

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"Single malt or a blend?"

"Like I said, whatever."

"Would Chivas be all right?"

I almost laughed aloud. Would it be all right? It was ambrosia from Olympus compared to what I swilled at the No-Name Bar. "Fine," I said.

"Ice? Soda?"

"Both."

She concocted my drink in a squat cut-crystal glass and brought it to me. I eyed the liquid in my glass, appreciating the dark amber, her light touch with the soda, for an instant or two before I sipped. Cool burn; delicious. She went back to pour Charlie's brandy into a fishbowl snifter.

"Yes to your question," she said as she crossed back to the desk. "I'm Rosa Lipschitz. Abe's widow." The word widow seemed to shrink her, droop her shoulders a bit. Could've been real; could've been an act. I didn't know her well enough to distinguish. Maybe nobody did. She sat at the desk, looked up blinkingly at Charlie, placing the brandy before him. He snatched up the snifter greedily, downed the syrupy liquid in a gulp. He held the fishbowl out, a salute to alcohol gods, liquor sprites.

"You know where we keep it," Rosa said.

Charlie moved faster than propriety dictated even if age didn't. He eschewed the bulky snifter for a tumbler, filled it to within an inch of the rim, then ambled to a Windsor chair near the wall of glass overlooking the back acreage, took a seat, and crossed his legs, as satisfied and smiling as a lord.

"Let me . . . why don't you show Scotty about while I steady my nerves, Rosa. When you return we can catch up."

"As you wish," she said, her voice flat. She started for the door to the hall beyond. "Mr. . . ?" she'd forgotten already. "If you would care to accompany me?"

"Dyer," I reminded her. "Sure. Can I bring my drink?"

She nodded and left the library. I followed, sipping, making the good stuff last. It might be a very long time before Mr. Chivas came my way again.

It was not unlike visiting the White House, or Jefferson's Monticello. She was the perfect tour guide.

I was impressed by the grandeur, if nonplussed by Charlie's reason for suggesting the tour. Finally, a suspicion struck me.

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". . . And this wing, of course, hasn't been in use since Charles left, some twenty years ago now."

We stood before the locked dark-oak pocket doors, a key the length of my hand in the socket of the ornate brass lock.

"Would you care to see his old rooms?"

"Yes," I said, reasonably sure this was what Charlie wanted.

A bedroom, a bath, a "day room," a mini-gymnasium of antique exercise equipment and free-weights. A study niche that was a miniature version of the library where we had left Charlie sucking up fine Napoleon brandy as if it were Boone's Farm.

On the wall were diplomas from various big-time colleges, all inscribed with Charlie's real name. They looked very legit. Indian artifacts which also looked legit littered the bookshelves, the books themselves mostly ethnographies of Indian customs, cultures, civilizations.

"Charles had a passion for all things Indian. He would rather have become an anthropologist than a geologist. Of course, his father would have none of that. Old Father Lipschitz wanted one of his sons to be able to find the ore necessary to make Jefferson Steel great; wanted the other son to be an accountant to keep track of just how great. Charles was meant to be the accountant. Becoming the geologist was Charles's meager rebellion against his father's iron-handed will." She hiccupped a small laugh, of a type peculiar to women unfamiliar with humor. "Charles always was the rebel, in his own small way."

I sucked on a diminutive roundness of ice, savoring the memory of the Chivas, now long gone, replenishment far away in the library.

"I had no idea," I said around the ice. Charlie had wanted me to see this, to know why he had made that choice. And I had to know where Rosa fit in. The good scotch made it easier to ask. "Do you know where Charlie has been these last—what did you say?—twenty years?"

She became very nervous, the first display of what I could recognize as real emotion. Small wrinkled hands pulled at each other, eyes darted. "I—I believe I do, Mr. Dyer."

"Do you know why Charlie left all this . . . for where he ended up?"

"It is an ugly memory, Mr. Dyer, one I would rather forget. The family business is steel, the largest mill outside of Pittsburgh. When old Mr. Lipschitz died, it passed to Abe and Charles, in equal partnership." She began walking, to make the talking easier. I followed,

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hoping we were heading in the direction of some answers to my questions, if not the Chivas.

"A more hateful partnership never existed, rivalry and animosity like Cain and Abel, Mr. Dyer, though it is difficult to decide which brother represented which Biblical counterpart. Good and Evil, do you understand? They both had their predilection for nastiness. Abe had to force Charles out on geological surveys, force him to sign off on them so that the company could mine the ore. Charles would go out on a survey expedition, you see, get bogged down in the intricacies of some Native American tribal belief in sacred ground or some such, wasting time until some other company snatched up the rights to the land. He just was never able to focus, you see, no head for business. Of course this infuriated Abe.

"Their hatred must have peaked twenty years ago. I walked in on the two of them in the library. Abe had one of those ugly little revolvers in his hand and was shouting something about making sure Charles never saw a dime. I assume he meant he was forcing Charles out of the business. Then Abe saw me, put the gun in the desk drawer, and nothing more was said. Charles walked out—wearing that suit he has on today, if I'm not mistaken—and I hadn't seen or heard from him until his phone call today, just after the police told me my husband was dead."

The story came to an immediate halt at the library. It had to, even if Rosa wasn't finished. Charlie stood, rather woozily, between two uniformed policemen. He was handcuffed.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" Old Rosa spoke for both of us, though I had a pretty good idea.

"Police business," one of the cops said. His older partner grimaced at him, smiled apologetically to Rosa.

"Mrs. Lipschitz, ma'am?" She verified his presumption with a terse nod. "And this gentleman is Charles Lipschitz, brother to your recently deceased husband, ma'am?" Rosa nodded again, even more curtly, if that were possible. "Sorry for the intrusion into your home, ma'am, in your time of grief an' all, but we have a warrant for his arrest. Homicide suspect in the demise of your husband, ma'am."

"Why, that's preposterous!"

I nodded in agreement, even while eyeing the shelf where Mr. Chivas lived. Cops make me really nervous. "That's right," I managed to say, licking my suddenly dry lips furiously. "Charlie was with me when Abe got popped."

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"And you are . . . ?" The younger cop made a threatening move toward me. Maybe it wasn't threatening, but it put him strategically between me and the Chivas.

"Dyer. I'm Scotty Dyer."

"And you can alibi this man? Can anyone corroborate?"

Seemed like a pretty big word for such a stupid-looking guy, but I told him yeah, and then he asked who. I felt it unwise to say "the winos at the No-Name Bar," so I said nothing.

"We would like you to come along with us, sir. To the station, if you wouldn't mind."

"What if I would mind?" I asked, sweating suddenly.

The older cop stepped closer to me, moving Charlie along with him. "I'd recommend cooperation."

That was it. The younger cop half-led, half-carried Charlie out, and the older cop took a firm grip on my right elbow. Polite, gentlemanly, but with no mistaking it wasn't really a request that I go along. So I did, leaving Rosa Lipschitz alone in that palatial library full of wonderful Mr. Chivas and his stout and hearty friends.

Downtown the two cops hauled Charlie off, presumably to make friends with the booking sergeant, but before they left, they motioned me to a chair at one of a row of some twenty ugly metal desks. I sat.

Guy named Detective DeGarmo, crew-cut, light-brown suit, dark-brown shirt, money-green tie loose at the collar, walked up and sat behind the desk.

"So, DeGarmo, what's the beef? Why did you drag Charlie in here? And me?" TV P.I. trick number one: put the cops on the defensive right off.

"So, Dyer," he countered, "why don't I get to ask the questions? In fact, my questions are exactly why you are here. Get it? As for your buddy Charlie? Well, he's number one on my hit parade for fratricide of the year. With a bullet, if you'll forgive the pun."

"How you figure?"

"Gun's registered to him, is how. Plus motive."

"What motive? Way I catch it, Abe Lipschitz booted Charlie out of a shot at the family money twenty years ago. Kind of a long grudge, don't ya think?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," DeGarmo hedged.

"Come on, detective, play the chorus so we can all sing along."

"Pardon me?" He scratched at the tiny hairs of his crew cut a moment then recognition spread over his standard-issue cop fea-

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tures. "Oh! That's right. You're the has-been sax man. What you want is for me to tell you all I know so you can say it ain't so. Well, that's not how we work it here, Dyer. You tell me. From the top."

"You've got statements from us," I told him. "The cops who came to the No-Name wrote it all down."

DeGarmo looked at me like I was speaking in an incomprehensible tongue.

"The cops who collected Abe Lipschitz's remains. Last night," I said, by way of explanation.

DeGarmo shuffled through papers from his "in" box, frowned, shuffled some more. Checked his "out" box. "All it says is that Turner and Watley questioned those present, and no one could help."

"They took detailed statements: names, addresses, everything. Not my fault if they didn't let you in on it." I let him think about it a minute. "Now whatever do you suppose those bad boys did with all that information?"

"I don't know, but I'm gonna fry their butts till they scream the answer. Sloppy work, just because it was on The Cass." He muttered the last part, but I heard it. It wasn't news, but his saying it formed a bond between us that made me drop the tough street-talk long enough to tell him what I had seen, what I knew about Charlie, what I had found out from Rosa.

Then the bond ended. He thanked me and cut me loose without telling me diddly-squat. Protests did no good. He escorted me out the front door personally. Tag line: "We'll be in touch."

Crucial: I made up my mind right then, if I was ever going to amount to anything for anybody, now was the time and Charlie was the who. No more vamping, waiting for the chorus to come 'round so I could get by fakin' the melody line. I had to help Charlie. Back to Rosa. Problem: night was quickly approaching and I was tapped like the only maple tree at a New England syrup convention. Then I remembered: I was wearing my clean, presentable suit of clothes. Money wasn't a problem. I approached the first three-piece suit I saw and said: "Say, pal, I was just mugged over on Michigan Avenue. Could you spare cab fare to . . ." And so it goes. If you look like you don't need it, they fork it over every time.

It's funny. You live on The Cass, for whatever reason. Last stop for some before the cardboard villages under the freeway overpasses. Last stop for others before the city scoops them up, treats them to a county funeral with all the trimmings. But you don't spend a lot of time worrying about it, about how the people on The Cass maybe

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look like that's the only place in the world they ever have or ever will belong. And the city sort of relegates them to that area. Like a line was drawn, a boundary: like a Reservation, perhaps.

The first trip out with Charlie, I didn't think about it. This trip, I did. I looked at my clothes, good enough to get me the dough for the cab fare but ratty when closely inspected. Seedy jazz-beard sax man hipster—no: like the cop said, "has-been sax man." Crucial: I knew I had no chops for playing, and so did the Musician's Union guys. So what did it all mean, this zenlike satori in the cab on the way to Birmingham? That I'd better find some way to save Charlie. His salvation was my last shot at something I could respect myself for.

I figured the maid knew who it was on the doorstep flagstones, each stone big as the hood of a '76 Cordoba, and wasn't about to answer the doorbell. I was wrong. Though it was Rosa who opened the door, invited me in.

She took me to the library, through the library, out the French doors to the stone terrace, where she motioned to a glass-topped table and expensive comfy lawn chairs. She said: "Hello," "Come in, won't you?" and "Please be seated, I'll bring something cool to drink."

I had said: "Hi," "Thanks," and "Okay." I sat on the terrace and she quickly brought a generous glass of scotch for me, a tall wine spritzer for herself.

"I'm sorry," Rosa said, "I've forgotten your name . . ." Polite as if welcoming the Fords or Dodges to afternoon tea.

"Scotty. Scotty Dyer, Mrs. Lipschitz."

"Rosa," the older woman corrected, almost coyly. She sat opposite me. "I was so upset when they took Charles away."

"That's why I'm here, Mrs. Lipschitz. How did the cops know Charlie was here?"

"It seems Consuelo, the downstairs maid, called them. Ex-downstairs maid, I should say." If her indignation was an act, she was Oscar-nominee material.

"You fired her?"

"But of course. Pity. After more than twenty years of service. But it was unconscionable, what she did."

"How did she know the cops wanted Charlie?"

"When they called about Abe being . . . they asked about Charles briefly. She must have been eavesdropping. She never liked Charles. She's part Indian, you know. Charles would question her about life

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among the Navajos, prod her until she would run away weeping. As I told you, this Indian thing was an obsession with Charles, and he could not understand why she insisted on denying her heritage."

I stared at her a long moment. "You know what I am? What old Charlie was? I was recently described by someone as a has-been sax man. That I am, and, most likely, an alcoholic of some proportion to boot. So was Charlie. I collect unemployment for not working, saying there are no jobs in my area of expertise when we all damn well know there never will be. I exploit the system, Mrs. Lipschitz, as did Charlie, and we both lived off those illicit gains on The Cass, throwing most all the money away on booze."

She didn't appear to be shocked, as I figured—hoped—she would be. "I know. I know all of that. You see, I've always known since the day Charles left. I had detectives on retainer, keeping tabs on Charles."

"Why would you do that?" I remembered that previously she had hedged about knowing where Charlie had spent the last twenty years. Maybe crucial. But I wasn't prepared to call her a liar.

"This is difficult. Mr. Dyer . . . I was affianced to Charles, before he introduced me to Abraham. Understand, Charles was exciting because of his rebelliousness, but also undependable, and scary at times. Abe looked like security, like money making more and more money. Charles looked like trouble, grief, gadfly trips to study dirty heathen peoples in nasty places. So . . . the long and short of it was, I married Abe instead of Charles. And of course, the way things turned out, I was right to do so, wouldn't you agree?"

I didn't want to answer that, so I didn't. Being naturally rude has its advantages. I stared up at the dripping heat of the sun. It shone brighter and cleaner in the 'burbs than it dared to on The Cass.

"Mr. Dyer. I could put my detectives on this, but how would that look? The widow paying an agency to exonerate the only suspect for her husband's murder? I mean, he was Abe's brother, but no kin of mine. Mr. Dyer, as Charlie's friend, will you help?"

A sincere request? How could I tell?

"I already am. Helping. But none of it makes sense. The cops have only one thing: the murder weapon, registered to Charlie. The one from the library? The one you saw them playing with twenty years ago?"

She nodded.

"Doesn't matter that the pistol has been right here these past twenty years. Doesn't matter that I can alibi Charlie. How believ-

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able will the testimony of a welfare-cheat be? That's the cops' angle: fast and neat. No investigation whatsoever.

"Possibilities: there are only four in this opus. Charlie did kill Abe, before I hooked up with him yesterday. Or Abe somehow shot himself to frame Charlie. Twenty years of brotherly hate might make him crazy enough to do that. But that only flies if he was suicidal, like if the business was goin' down the dumper or if Abe only had a couple of weeks to live—bad health, the big C, whatever."

Rosa shook her head. I assumed that meant Abe didn't qualify as a suicide on either count. I thought I saw the hint of a smirk at the corners of her aristocratic mouth. Maybe it was a natural expression for aristocratic mouths. "Then there's Consuelo, the maid. You said she hated Charlie. And since you claim Abe could be a first-class bad guy, maybe she hated him, too. She was sure to have known about the gun in the drawer. She's had it with everyone so she offs Abe, knows the cops will trace the gun. She helps out by tipping them when Charlie shows up here." I drank some more. Rosa waited. But only for a little while. The rich are probably all impatient.

"You said four. Four possibilities."

"You, of course. Guilt about jilting Charlie, your little 'I'll show you' scheme gone awry, seething over all these years. Fed up with Abe, whom you never loved anyway. Crime of passion, whatever, you do it, hope the cops call it an accident. Maybe you can convince Charlie to come home, sober him up, and the two of you live happily ever after."

"But it isn't working out that way. The police arrested Charles, Mr. Dyer."

"Maybe that's why you want me to help, not your professional detectives, who might discover too much. But that won't play either. Even if the cops listen to me, the alternative to locking up Charlie is locking up you, and your plan for a love nest still goes out the window."

"I'm sixty-two, Mr. Dyer. Old for crimes of passion."

"You're never too old to get fed up. Anger and hurt don't carry expiration dates like mayonnaise. They got a shelf-life of forever times two."

"So without proof of these theories, Charles dies in prison?"

"Looks like. In the movies, the P.I. confronts the bad guy who confesses, then jumps off a skyscraper, circumventing the need for proof. In real life, the Wayne County prosecutor is gonna take Charlie down hard for murder one. It's the only choice. Newspapers will

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love it at first, 'cause of Charlie's beginnings, but for twenty years now he's been a wino on The Cass. Who cares?"

"What could one do if one cared?"

Her syntax startled me for a moment. It seemed an odd way of phrasing the question: then I remembered her upbringing undoubtedly determined it, and made her sound colder than she meant to be. "Can you think of anything else to tell me?"

"No."

She said it too fast for someone who cared.

"Well, my only other source is Consuelo. Do you have her new address?"

"She can't tell you anything. Besides, she's always lived here. I have no idea where she might have gone."

"Did she pack?"

"No, I don't believe she—"

"Then she'll be back. She's not gonna trot around town in her maid's uniform till she bags another gig. I'll wait."

Rosa poured straight scotch and swilled it down like any hardcore alky bag lady on The Cass.

Eyeing the fountains, lawns, and hedges, I dreamed it all belonged to me and some beautiful, interesting woman, not the suddenly sulky Rosa Lipschitz. Easy for me. I'm a romantic, deep down. Fred, my sax, and I tell bigger lies when we make music together.

I abandoned the fantasy to mull over the solutions I had rattled off for Rosa. Big problem: I didn't know when Abe was shot. If he'd been hit in Birmingham, did he drive all the way to The Cass to find Charlie, just to die in front of the brother he hated? How did he know where to find Charlie? Why would he go to Charlie instead of a hospital?

None of it made sense. At least the cops had a gun, and the guy who owned it.

The sun was almost gone when Consuelo stepped onto the terrace and announced she was picking up her belongings. Wordlessly, Rosa stood and followed Consuelo into the house. So did I. The servants' quarters. Made me feel more down-and-out than ever, seeing the posh comfort in which the hired help lived.

Consuelo was really burned, as evidenced by her slamming of drawers and doors. Twenty-odd years, all up in smoke because of one bitsy phone call to the cops. Not fair, but she should've known the servants can't rat on the masters, even if one of them is a murderer.

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I was sauced enough to be blunt. "So, Consuelo, why did you hate Charlie?"

Her dark eyes flashed. I noticed then that if you imagined her twenty years ago, thinner, she had been a real looker. "He was a pig. For all his studies of The People, he had no understanding of pride. He was a disgrace to all he said he admired. He had no business coming back here."

"Today?"

"Yes. And the other time."

"Other time? Like when?"

"Yesterday. Late evening."

Could have been. Charlie was late hooking up with me. "You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. They argued, like always. Mr. Abe wanted to tell Charlie something. Old Charlie wouldn't listen. Stood there in his braids and fake-Indian shirt, counted coup, and walked out."

"Did what?"

"Counted coup. You know. Like a Sioux warrior. It is more brave to count coup on an enemy than to kill him."

"I don't know what—"

"Like this." She stood directly before me, then smacked me good and hard in the center of my forehead.

"Then the warrior turns his back. Not afraid of death, or his enemy. That's what crazy Charlie did. Old fool thinks he's an Indian, like it's something great to be. Mister, I left the Navajo Reservation over twenty years ago, and never looked back. I cursed my luck for ending up here with Charlie, so crazy about Indians he knew I was a 'breed even though my name is Latino."

She went back to packing, calmer now, having vented a bit.

Rosa, standing in the doorway, presumably to guard the family linen from theft, had become increasingly agitated as Consuelo spoke. Now, as if remembering something more important to attend to, or perhaps somehow fearing what else Consuelo had to relate, she suddenly left her post.

Consuelo's dark eyes followed her former boss-lady, hate burning in them. She spat out a "b" word.

"You probably think Consuelo shot old Abe. True, I hated him, hated that woman. Treated me like dirt, she and Abe. Not like the Anglo girls upstairs or in the kitchen. But I didn't kill nobody. And you know, when I saw crazy Charlie count coup, I felt pride, I guess, for my people. Pride, maybe for the first time in my whole life.

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Charlie reminded me what courage is. Even if he was just playing at being an Indian, and it took twenty years for him to find courage enough on his own. Only he was angry with the wrong person, just as old Abe had been angry with the wrong person twenty years before."

She fell silent, then. My turn.

"You know who did it, and it wasn't Charlie. You just told me that. He counted coup. He didn't kill Abe, whatever their differences."

"Sure, I know who. But I won't tell the police."

"Why? Why would you keep it a secret?"

"Charlie showed courage when he counted coup, and made me realize it was lack of courage that brought me to this Anglo world. Abe's death is part of this world where I've never belonged. Courage is believing in what you are. Charlie played at being Indian, but he believed in it. Not like me in my maid's uniform. I played my part but never believed. Where a person belongs is sometimes not easy to know, but I know now, and I'm going back. None of this is my concern."

"So tell *me,* at least."

She shrugged, and told me, finishing with the click of the latches on her old beat-up suitcase, the same one that had brought her poor belongings from the Reservation in New Mexico to the tree-lined serenity of Birmingham all those years ago.

It would've gone bad for Charlie if he'd survived the D.T.'s. He had a heart attack in his cell two days after Consuelo left. It saved him a lot of bad moments with the prosecutor, the jury of his peers who wouldn't have understood a rich white man who wanted so badly to be "the noble savage" he had read about in books that he ended up a wino on The Cass.

He had thought he loved Consuelo, badgered her about marrying him, moving with him back to the noble, simple life on the Navajo Reservation. Horrified, she made him go, to see for himself. It was the late sixties, and Charlie went. He quickly saw how the noble savage of his textbooks and ethnographies had been brought low, subjugated for a hundred years by white authority, ghettoized, like misfits. Disenfranchised. Like the misfits on The Cass, the only place Charlie could find upon returning that resembled what he had seen on the Reservation. In drunken anguish he had even tried following Biblical advice . . . if thine eye offends thee . . . only he botched that, too.

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Rosa? Women like her rarely botch things. Guilt isn't even a key change in the obligato they play to other people's lives. Consuelo told me about it. Abe and Rosa arguing in the library. Abe wanting Charlie back, crazy as he was, claiming a brother was still a brother. They were getting too old to quibble about past history. Rosa refusing to split the wealth with a lunatic old drunk. Then Abe played the trump card: He knew the truth about Charlie's visit to Consuelo's Reservation. The land, the sand and barren rock, was Navajo, all right, but the rich minerals beneath belonged to Jefferson Steel. The people living above saw only pennies for all the thousands of dollars of Jefferson Steel profit wrung like blood from the land, and Rosa had forged Charlie's signature on the mineral rights agreement, claiming he'd signed it before he left home. Abe would have Charlie back in the family, rehabilitated, or Rosa would be prosecuted for fraud and forgery. Then came the gunshot; Rosa running out, hell-bent, in the family Eldorado, Abe stumbling after, gun in hand, bleeding from the small but eventually fatal wound.

Abe found the No-Name Bar because the detectives had been his, not Rosa's. He had, twenty years past, used the threat of psychiatric evaluations to kick Charlie out of the business. He was unstable, a "bleeding heart" who let feelings get in the way of profit. Yet Abe had also kept an eye on Charlie all those years in between, out of a sense of duty, if not love. And his last act on earth had been a noble attempt to warn Charlie with his own oozing wound how badly Rosa, the real driving force behind Abe's greed, meant to have all the family money. Even Charlie must have realized somewhere near the end that she would have killed him too if the wheels of justice weren't so predictably geared against the indigent, the homeless, the drunkenly insane. It was, of course, Rosa's phone call, not Consuelo's, that brought the police to Birmingham for Charlie.

All Consuelo's version, sure, but I believed it. Little good it would've done Charlie. Hearsay evidence from me, in court, Consuelo long gone, lost in the high chaparral somewhere on the Reservation in New Mexico; gone home, finally, as we all must some day. In the end, no one was going to work to clear Charlie's name or prove a twenty-year-old forgery to help a bunch of Navajo.

Nothing big would change in the way I went on with what I grimly called my life, but what detective DeGarmo told me helped. He was with crazy old Charlie when he croaked.

It happened as the EMS guys were dragging Charlie out of the cop shop on a stretcher, headed for County General. Old Charlie

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cocked his good eye up at the night and summer stars and said: "The Great Spirit welcomes me. Tell Scotty it's beautiful there." DeGarmo says that's the way it was. Old Charlie One-Eye said that, smiled, and died.

Me? Fred the sax and I talk about it, late at night. Down by the river, under the stars, Fred speaks, wails, cries for Charlie, for Consuelo, for me here on The Cass, and all the others out there like us. Those who hear it say it's the saddest tune me an' Fred have ever laid down. I tell them they're right.

DETECTIVERSE

THE PLOT THICKENS

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

Mistress Mary, quite contrary,
Mom Goose warns you to be wary
Of whom you in your garden bury;
She knows there's Tom and Dick and Harry,
Along with Peter, Joe, and Terry.
Your yard is getting to be scary.
It's looking like a cemetery.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Policemen figure importantly in Jeffry Scott's crime stories. His first publication in the United States was a story that appeared in EQMM *and had previously won a 1971 contest sponsored by the Crime Writers Association of Britain. That story introduced thousands of American readers to the Rosetta Street–Great Northern Avenue–Cap-a-Pie Lane Police District and its Inspector Lochiel. Mr. Scott's Detective Superintendent Bob Ayscough is a very different kind of cop, having earned his stripes in a cathedral city instead of the mean streets of London, and the case that confronts him here may seem, in comparison, genteel . . .*

A CASE OF SUDDEN DEATH

by JEFFRY SCOTT

According to one theory, philosophy, whatever, policemen ought not to make friends in the community they serve. Of course, spiteful people suggest that policemen lack true friends anyway, save among their own repressive kind. However, certain coppers form amicable links with certain civilians, and yes, it can render them vulnerable.

Bob Ayscough liked most folk until given strong reasons for feeling otherwise, and he'd worked in or near the cathedral city of Landfield for the greater part of his long career, so he had plenty of friends there. One being a difficult old man called Cedric Paine—a telling name, Ayscough used to joke, though he kept up occasional visits.

Detective Superintendent Ayscough was saddened though not shocked to learn of Paine's sudden death. It was not a shock because

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old Cedric had hardly hidden the ambition to end his own life. Dutifully, Bob Ayscough had made all the conventional noises, weeks ago, when Cedric broached the subject after the second scotch of the evening—the policeman having taken a bottle along, for Cedric was stingy. Inwardly, the superintendent was dubious about the banalities he felt obliged to mouth.

"Damn it," Cedric Paine had croaked, "I've had my Biblical three score years and ten, and a few over. I've earned my rest." Only to drop the bluster and continue: "Remember what I went through, five years back? Now it turns out they never cured me, I was just in whatsit . . . *remission*. They intend sticking me full of needles and soon it will be dope and radiation treatment and the rest of it, all over again. To make me last a few months longer, feeling terrible, before I peg out. It's damned well obscene."

"That's nonsense, Ced'. The quacks have a job to do, and . . . Well, nobody has the right to top 'emselves, that's up to fate or God, depending on what you believe in. What's more, suppose you make a mess of it, right state you'll be in then."

"I won't make a mess of it, I was in the army, remember." So he had been, half a century before.

Time for the next platitude. "It's still selfish. What about people left behind? Rotten thing to do to them."

Speaking a laugh, Cedric Paine had retorted, "Funny you should say that. It came to me the other day, I've lived too long, nobody left who cares a straw about me. Don't get the violin out, start playing 'Hearts and Flowers.' It cheered me up no end, makes a chap stronger when he knows where he stands."

"With difficulty, if you keep knocking this back," Superintendent Ayscough had jeered, retrieving the whisky bottle and screwing its cap back. "You're full of hot air, Ced'. What about young Ray? He thinks the world of you." They were in the living room of Paine's isolated bungalow, sparsely furnished, cleanly and neatly shabby—except for the brand-new fitted carpet. Bob Ayscough had stamped on it for emphasis. "What about this bit of gear, eh?"

Raymond Farmer, Cedric's scamp of a nephew, had installed that carpet, despite his uncle's protests. Explaining to Superintendent Ayscough, "He had the same carpet for thirty years to my knowledge, more holes than carpet. The silly old sod was bound to catch his toe, fall over, and end up in the hospital with a broken hip. That's curtains, at his age—next thing's pneumonia, and the long box." Being Ray Farmer, the beautiful carpet had been bought but

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not paid for, leading to the Samaritan's appearance in small claims court. There was no harm in Cedric's nephew, apart from fecklessness and devout immaturity. His tragedy, though Raymond Farmer took it very lightly, lay in all the things he was good at—target-shooting, yachting, escorting sexy women with expensive tastes—tending to eat money rather than generating income.

"You know," Bob Ayscough had accused, taunting Cedric Paine away from morbid self-pity, "you're a wicked old devil, letting Ray get himself into trouble to make a poverty-stricken pensioner's life easier."

To which Mr. Paine had replied, "Does the little beggar good to think of somebody beside himself. Ray's no use to man nor beast." But it came out fondly. And his grin was sheepish, as he contemplated the carpet . . . "Raymond's sentimental, but deep feelings? Not him. He'll cheer up quick enough."

Now, some two months after that conversation, Superintendent Ayscough listened as the desk sergeant at Haygarth Gate police station, using the direct line to Landfield Central, reported that Cedric Paine had been found dead at his home. Haygarth Gate was an outlying substation, on a council estate half a mile from Paine's bungalow.

"Just had a Mrs. Kelly in, sir. Ran all the way, wouldn't use the phone at the house because it's right next to the old chap."

"That'll be Min Kelly, cooks and cleans for him."

"Can't get much sense out of her, she's upset, but certain he's dead. Cold and stiff, she says. Reckons he must have killed himself."

"Oh, he would have," Ayscough sighed.

"I've sent PC Hutchinson round to guard the premises, told him not to go in until you or Inspector Demarest takes charge, sir."

Peter Demarest was Landfield CID's latest new broom. He had attended a recent Home Office seminar on homicide investigation, sitting at the feet of a visiting guru from the FBI. Ever since, he had been nagging the uniformed branch about preserving the integrity of a serious crime scene, preaching how easily it could be "polluted." This had not gone down well; somebody grumbled to Bob Ayscough that it was bad enough for hooligans and yobs to brand them Pigs or The Filth, without a comrade dismissing them as an environmental hazard. . . .

Tone neutral, Superintendent Ayscough assured the Haygarth Gate sergeant that he'd done exactly the right thing, hung up, and went next door to Inspector Demarest.

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Peter Demarest's face fell when Ayscough explained the background. "Still a sudden death," he murmured wistfully. The older man nearly smiled: Demarest, a desperately serious fellow, still had the momentary aura of a small boy itching to demonstrate his new model train set.

"Suicide's still a killing," Demarest thought aloud, almost pleadingly. "My church calls it self-murder, in fact."

Superintendent Ayscough remembered Cedric Paine jeering, "It's not even illegal to kill yourself, like it was in the old days. So it's none of your business, Bob!" How the old chap loved having the last word . . .

"Look, if you want to give Ced' the full treatment, use this like a training exercise for the real thing, go ahead. But don't make too much of a production of it. Spin a routine enquiry out for days, and we'll start nasty rumours about foul play."

Very soon—though Inspector Demarest was far too correct to remind him of the remark—Bob Ayscough's face grew fiery when he remembered that warning.

Given the green light, Inspector Demarest ordered his sergeant to set up a Serious Incident Room at Haygarth Gate police station. Superintendent Ayscough said, "I'll go out there with you, Peter. It's all right, you're running the show. But Ced' was by way of being a pal of mine."

When they reached the bungalow, Peter Demarest took off his shoes and donned paper slippers, offering a second pair to his superior. Ayscough grunted, "Never mind, needn't go inside. See all I need to through the front window, I expect." Already he regretted the impulse to come here. Cedric Paine was past caring, but it irked the superintendent that Paine's passing should be pretext for a charade, however legitimate, well-meaning, and technically correct . . .

He went to the window to one side of the front door. It gave an excellent view of the living room. Paine, in old-fashioned pajamas so bleached by years of laundering that their blue and white stripes were practically identical, a faded green dressing gown, and cracked leather slippers, sat in his usual armchair. The toe of one slipper curled up at an angle, Turkish fashion, giving the corpse a sadly ludicrous touch.

Paine's right arm hung straight down outside the chair's solid arm, as if pointing to the silvery automatic pistol on the floor. The corpse had the rigid, unnatural look of a store dummy. *He did it last night,* Ayscough guessed, *or the early hours of this morning.*

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Probably this morning. Woke up hurting, and four A.M. is a great time to finish it all. I've never felt happy or hopeful in the small hours.

Bob Ayscough registered that the carpet still looked incongruously new in its modest setting, and turned away, saying flatly, "All yours, Peter." He badly wanted to snarl, "Enjoy," but that would have been bad for discipline and unfair besides. Demarest was a good copper and a decent if humourless man; and he had not been Cedric Paine's friend. . . .

Four hours later, Superintendent Ayscough was back at Haygarth Gate police station, being brought up to speed on what appeared to be a murder case rather than a suicide—simply because the instrument of destruction had been an automatic pistol and not a revolver.

Inspector Demarest had handled an overtly cut-and-dried affair by the book. The doctor was bullied into those paper slippers and shepherded, monitored, every inch of the way to and from the corpse. Room and contents were photographed first, and again immediately afterwards. A detective constable drew a sketch plan with exact dimensions, gridding it so that the precise location of every item, not least the victim, could be recorded.

Peter Demarest's first reservation was marginal. There was no sign of a farewell note on or near Cedric Paine. (Later the entire bungalow was combed, confirming that no such message existed.) Inspector Demarest knew, less from experience than from his studies, that the majority of suicides have something to say, verbal or written. Relatively few feel that the act is a statement in itself.

But that was not what alerted Demarest and his crew.

Paine had been shot in the head, level with and just ahead of his right ear. A .22 automatic pistol lay inches from the side of his chair, near his right foot.

Inspector Demarest had been punctilious, thus far, restricting entry to the room to himself and two CID men, both wearing disposable gloves. And he remained punctilious, searching the floor on hands and knees before instructing them to look for what had to be there—but was not.

When a bullet is fired from what is loosely known as an automatic (pedants prefer semiautomatic, or self-loading pistol) an empty cartridge case is left behind, though only for an instant. It is ejected, spat out, generally flicking away to the right of a right-handed shooter, rather than across their body. It must be put out of the way: for the magazine spring pushes a new, unfired cartridge into

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the breech, and as everyone learns in early math lessons, two into one won't go.

There was no cartridge case in the room. In the bad (or at least, less structured) old days, somebody might have taken it away or hidden it by accident. Treading, for instance, on a tiny, hollow object, under one inch long, diameter no more than that of a knitting needle, and carrying it away stuck to mud or chewing gum on the sole of a constabulary boot. That was out of the question in the painstaking context set by the inspector.

And that, Peter Demarest decided, made suicide impossible—Paine could not have shot himself fatally and then removed the crucial evidence—while murder was a distinct probability.

"It's not there," he repeated, misreading Ayscough's expression. "I have personally gone over every inch of the room, literally. I've had the carpet up, dismantled the armchair, checked that it didn't get hidden in deceased's nightwear or fall and get caught in a fold of his skin or whatever.

"Ballistics will establish how far that weapon throws a spent cartridge—can't be more than twelve inches or so, probably less. Even if it rolled when it hit the deck, not that it would roll far on carpet. . . . We searched the hall as well, without result. The cleaning woman says she never went into the room, saw Mr. Paine from the doorway and ran for her life. Nobody else went in or out until we got there. And I'm not being self-serving, but neither I nor my people missed, lost, hid, or destroyed the thing."

"Whoa," Superintendent Ayscough appealed. "I'm sure you're right, Peter. It's just that I can't get the hang of this: somebody kills Ced', rigs it to look like suicide . . . but makes absolutely sure that it won't be accepted as such. Where's the sense in that?"

"Beats me," Demarest confessed, human for a change. "The shooter can't have realised the implications of that cartridge case. Either it flipped out of the gun and fell into his trouser turnup or maybe a pocket gaping open, and he never noticed, or he *did* notice and still picked it up. People do crazy things under pressure, habit takes over or totally illogical behaviour surfaces for a while.

"The other option is that the cleaner, Mrs. Kelly, took the cartridge case not knowing what it was. Bit of metal on the carpet, so she picked it up by second nature? Or she did know, and hid it for some reason." The inspector shook his head. "I'll take her over the fences again, but she's a timid old biddy and swears she didn't touch

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anything, never set foot in there, having spotted the body from out in the hall. Why would she lie?"

"Not Min," Ayscough agreed. "Honest as the day is long, that one. She's got nothing to do with it. This is a puzzler, my lad."

"I've got a house-to-house going, in case somebody saw a visitor. But the doc thinks Paine was killed hours before Mrs. Kelly discovered the body. Postmortem should give a better window on time of death. I think it happened in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep. No near neighbours, and the report from a .22 isn't much louder than . . . well, not so loud as a vehicle backfiring."

"It will come down to motive," the superintendent predicted dully. "That and the gun. Didn't belong to Ced'."

"If we can trace it. Serial number's in the computer." Inspector Demarest did not sound hopeful. "Motive . . . who benefits? That bungalow might fetch sixty thousand or so, providing the old boy owned it free and clear. Otherwise, I doubt if he had two pennies to rub together. Didn't even have a TV set, just a radio out of the Ark. Two suits in his wardrobe, four shirts in the drawer. Sad, really. Can't have been much of a life, scraping by on the state pension."

"Appearances deceive," said Ayscough. "Cedric had money, he just hated spending it. Master builder in his day, loads of cheap 'n cheerful houses that went up here after Hitler's war are his doing. He was worth half a million when he retired, and money was money then."

Peter Demarest whistled, eyes bright. "Well, well, well. He was worth killing, then."

"To save you asking, Ced' was a lifelong bachelor. Only one blood relation left, his nephew. Odds are that Raymond Farmer will inherit the lot."

"Aye-aye, I know that name. Bit of a tearaway, a dot on the card—seen him on the blotter for D&D."

Drunk and disorderly, by all means, the superintendent acknowledged mentally. That did not make Ray Farmer a killer, just an idiot. But men can change; sadly, seldom for the better as years pass.

Sick at heart, he said, "Maybe I can beat the computer. Farmer has a firearms certificate with multiple entries, it will be on file at HQ. The pistol that killed Ced' probably belongs to his nephew."

Ray Farmer, wan and out of sorts, smiled painfully. "Hello, Mr. Ayscough." He took in Peter Demarest's presence without comment-

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ing on it. "Thanks for looking in, I know you and Unk was close. If it's about when the funeral will be . . . sorry, I'm a bit tied up at present, haven't made the arrangements yet."

"This isn't a condolence visit. Detective Inspector Demarest here has some questions relating to your uncle's death."

A puzzled expression, too puzzled for Bob Ayscough's taste, appeared on Farmer's face. "Sure, fire away," he agreed—grimacing at the accidental play on words.

"Do you," Inspector Demarest began, "own a .22 automatic pistol, an Argive Super-Hi . . ." and he rattled off the registration number.

"You know I do." Farmer addressed the superintendent, tone faintly aggrieved. "It's on my certificate with the others."

"Can you produce—" Demarest changed course in midsentence, amending it to, "Is that pistol still in your possession?"

Leaning sideways, Ray Farmer opened a drawer in the little cupboard and passed a well-filled key ring to the inspector. "Take the small one off, that flat joker with the red tag. It's for my locker at the Rifle Club." And to Ayscough once more, "Last time I renewed my permits, your crime prevention chappie wasn't happy with me keeping the gear at my digs, not secure enough. So I store them at the club, that's safe as a bank. Both the shorts, the handguns, will be in boxes with their names on the lids. Be my guest."

"We'll look," said Ayscough, "but it's a waste of time. Evidently you've heard about Cedric Paine's death—"

"Min Kelly rang this morning."

"And you may know that he died of a gunshot wound. The weapon involved being an Argive Super-Hi .22, bearing the registration number on your certificate. Any idea how that came about, Mr. Farmer?"

A long pause. Finally Ray Farmer muttered, "I wondered why he . . . Cunning old bugger!" Then he fell silent.

"You're not being clear, sir." Inspector Demarest was courteous, patient.

Farmer said, "You know Unk, Mr. Ayscough, he didn't get about much. If I wanted to see him, I had to go there. But last month he came to my place. A week or so earlier he'd taken a fancy to seeing my shooting stuff."

He rubbed his jaw, stubble audible. "Unk was a commando in World War II, see. Wanted to check out modern firepower. Rare for him to show an interest in anything—unless it was telling me to get my act together—so I humoured him."

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As the policemen listened stolidly, the pace of Ray Farmer's narrative slowed. He found it hard going. "Well, Unk said the Rifle Club's round the corner from my digs and he lived the other side of town, no sense in lugging the stuff all that way, he'd come to me. Which he did, this would have been, um, two weeks back, a Wednesday night.

"I did the full bit, brought everything back and laid it out on my bed—rifles and the handguns, and brochures for 'em, and some cups and medals. Unk wasn't interested in the long guns, he liked the pistols." Farmer's tone took a pleading note. "I never thought nothing of that. Target rifles these days, they'd look funny to an old-timer, not like his old Lee-Enfields. He mucked around with the pistols and I stripped 'em for him; he dry-fired the Argive.

"Then Unk said how about a takeaway, he could do with some grub but didn't want all the fuss of a restaurant. I nipped up the road to the Chinese chip-shop. When I got back, he'd put the pistols back in their boxes and the boxes into the tin trunk I carry my Rifle Club stuff in." Ray Farmer swallowed drily. "He must have nicked the Argive then, see. Put something the right weight in the box . . ."

"You never checked the contents of the boxes before returning them to your locker at the club?" Ayscough didn't hide skepticism.

"I *trusted* him, my own uncle, come on! Never entered my head he would steal anything."

Inspector Demarest, poker-faced, broke in. "I understand how that could happen, sir." Farmer beamed at the unexpected support, though not for long.

Peter Demarest, still low-key, continued, "But I don't see how Mr. Paine got hold of ammunition for the pistol. I take it, sir, the ammunition was still under lock and key at the Rifle Club, not needed at your lodgings. You were showing deadly weapons to an elderly person whose knowledge was fifty years behind the times. Surely you didn't put loaded guns into his hand?"

"No! They were all unloaded, and I made darned sure they stayed that way. All right, when I packed the gear from my locker, I put nearly everything in, force of habit I suppose. Rifle ammo was on a different shelf, that stayed behind. There was a carton of .22 rounds in with the Argive, though. I never loaded it, mind. Unk must have nicked a few rounds while I was away getting our supper from the Chinese."

Ray Farmer rested a forearm across his eyes. "Look, there's a notebook in my locker at the club, with receipts and suchlike clipped

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to the cover. Think I've burned off seven or eight rounds of .22 stuff from the last batch I bought. It'll say in the book. If that doesn't tally with what's left, then Unk took what's missing."

Superintendent Ayscough said, "At best, your certificate will be withdrawn and the weapons confiscated, Mr. Farmer. At best, you have been negligent. At best."

The arm came down. "What's this 'Mr. Farmer' stuff?" His eyes narrowed. "Here, am I suspected of something?"

"That's for you to say. We'll be talking again—Mr. Farmer." Taking Ayscough's cue, Inspector Demarest stood up. But the superintendent wasn't through. "Tragic loss, eh?"

Sulkily, Ray Farmer muttered, "Unk wouldn't say so. Only had a few months left, or didn't you know his old trouble came back?"

Ignoring that, Ayscough said, "Always a silver lining, though. I dare say you're remembered in the will."

Farmer stiffened, started to reply, thought better of it. Eventually he sneered, "Yeah, my famous inheritance. His bungalow. Well, I can save fifty quid a week rent by living there now . . . until it falls to bits. There's old mine workings under that ground, Mr. Ayscough, Unk tried selling the place once, and it failed the survey—too much subsidence in the area. Not dangerous, like, but only a fool would buy it. That's what I get out of Unk snuffing it. Believe it or not, I'd have paid a hundred a week, if I had it, to keep the old perisher alive and happy. But he wasn't happy, he was sick and tired, so I'm not sorry he's gone."

"Don't insult my intelligence, boy. I'm talking about Cedric's *money*. He retired with a bundle and made it grow. The estate should be worth the best part of a million, now."

Farmer gaped at him. "You're kidding! He didn't have . . . he lived on the smell of an oily rag, did Unk!" And then they saw dread invade the man, invisible yet palpable as rising water. "I never knew that, Mr. Ayscough! As God's my judge, I thought I was on for nothing but the bungalow, and that was a sick joke." Farmer laughed angrily. "Bored the ass off me since I was a teenager, banging on about his partners letting him down, suppliers robbed him blind and the subcontractors went bust and nigh ruined him. . . . I was sorry for him, I worried, and it was all kid-stakes, a con job."

Unbending a little, Bob Ayscough said, "Ced' liked making a poor mouth, fooling folk into underestimating him. Never worked with me, I knew better. It tickled him to squeeze every penny while knowing he could buy or sell half the flash people in Landfield."

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Ray Farmer, not listening, was still coming to terms with what he had been told. "Him being rich, he must have known what it'd seem like when—" His mouth shut with a snap and he turned defiant. "Never thought I'd be grateful for bad luck!"

Raymond Farmer not only had an alibi, he was lying on and partially surrounded by it. Four days before Cedric Paine's death, Farmer had ridden his motorcycle (unlicensed, uninsured, naturally) into a ditch, breaking both legs. He was in Landfield District Hospital, and suspension, in either order.

Ayscough and Demarest had gone into the matter with a consultant, a doctor, and the ward sister. All concurred in stating the obvious: Raymond Farmer could not have stirred from his bed.

As soon as they were outside, Bob Ayscough prodded Peter Demarest in the chest. "First impressions, quick!"

"Uh . . . He was expecting us. Rotten actor, he knew you hadn't come to say how sorry you were. And the stuff about Paine stealing the gun—hooey." Unwittingly, Inspector Demarest evoked Stan Laurel, scratching his head while staring dolefully across the hospital parking lot. "But I think he really *was* gutted when you told him how much his uncle was worth. It was news to him. Unless he's a terrific actor playing a bad one, double-bluff . . . nah, he didn't know." Demarest hissed impatiently. "Is it possible that Farmer was unaware of 'Unk' being rich? Way you told it, Paine was a big-deal builder for years, Farmer must have heard of that."

"Not necessarily. Ced' never lived high and handsome when he was in business, and that was thirty years back, remember. Like Ray was saying, Ced' let on that he hadn't retired, he was forced out on the brink of going bust.

"I only found out otherwise through one of those unofficial, deniable enquiries from a chum of mine, used to have your job, went private in the eighties. A merchant bank in London wanted the form on Cedric, he was involved in a major deal and his end was something like a quarter-million quid. No question of him being good for that much, but when a mystery man waves telephone-numbers money at reputable City gents, they like to know where it and he are coming from."

Superintendent Ayscough, unlocking the car, went on, "For what it's worth, my reading is that Ced' and Ray Farmer reached an implicit agreement, nod-and-a-wink stuff. The way it's done in family circles, nothing stated, everything understood. Ced' needed a

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quick way out, his nephew had the means. When the old chap asked to see those guns, Ray twigged what was on, and let him pinch one. All that stuff about happening to bring ammunition for the .22 and assuming the gun was back in the box is hogwash. A pair of half-smart idiots, one intent on suicide, the other ready to help him and then hold his hands up and say, 'I never knew.' Ray probably rationalised that he was helping Ced'."

"He good as admitted it," Inspector Demarest nodded, "nearly blurted out that he would not have supplied the pistol if he had known he stood to make a fortune out of Paine's death."

Ayscough asserted, "Ced' would never let his nephew risk suspicion of murder. He didn't do it until Ray was safely out of the frame. Which shows it was suici—no, damn and blast, that doesn't follow."

"Because Paine *didn't* kill himself," Peter Demarest groaned.

"I hate and detest this kind of thing," Bob Ayscough glowered. "Stinks of locked rooms and cast-iron alibis and all the whodunit rubbish." Thick fingers drummed on the steering wheel. "Cedric could not have shot himself; unless Ced' changed his will, only Ray stands to gain; but Ray couldn't have shot him. What's more, even if he did know what his uncle was worth, he also knew for certain that he would come into his inheritance within months, by natural causes."

When they got back to the Serious Incident Room, more information had been gathered. None of it pleased them.

The Argive .22 had been fingerprinted. There was a textbook thumbprint on the weapon's slide, where it had been yanked back to cock the action. Another thumbprint on the left face of the magazine, and one from a forefinger on the opposite side, left on the slot-in container of cartridges when it was picked up. One unfired cartridge bore a partial thumbprint identical with those on magazine and slide.

All four prints belonged to the late Cedric George Paine.

It got worse. Paine's solicitor produced the victim's will. Apart from a token sum to Mrs. Minerva Kelly and five thousand pounds in bequests among a dozen Landfield charities, everything went to the deceased's nephew, Raymond Farmer.

Towards midnight, Inspector Demarest was arranging Polaroid photographs on his desk, in the manner of a man dealing himself a hand of Patience. Many showed Cedric Paine's body from various angles. Demarest spoke hoarsely. "I just thought . . . maybe we *did* miss that bloody cartridge case. Couldn't have. But maybe. Look,

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these are through the front window, these from the doorway. Before, so far as we know, anyone had been in there since the shot was fired. Virgin territory."

"Unpolluted," Superintendent Ayscough suggested, wearily malicious.

"Exactly." Peter Demarest was oblivious to the taunt. "Silly, but I wondered if the case was there on the floor and would show up. New carpet, smooth, not shag-pile. Texture shows up well. I'm looking for a glint of brass . . . and it isn't there."

He exhaled dispiritedly. "See the old chap's slipper, where the toe's sort of cockled up? Maybe he kicked somebody: sign of a struggle? Somebody made him load the gun and—nah, ridiculous, hand your victim a deadly weapon . . . ? And the pathologist's findings are a great help, I don't think. Muzzle of the gun extremely close to the entry wound but not touching the skin. I hoped they'd say it was too far away for Paine to have pulled the trigger."

Superintendent Ayscough, staring at glossy, sharp, wholly unartistic images, clapped the other man's shoulder. "Get off home. Me too. It will still be waiting for us tomorrow."

"I was afraid of that." Ayscough was amazed. Weariness might have tricked him, but he was fairly sure that Peter Demarest had broken the mould by contriving a joke.

When Ayscough got home, downstairs lights still glowed, and he could hear Lorna working the vacuum cleaner. "Sorry I'm late, dear." Closing the front door behind him, he watched her slide the cleaner into a closet under the stairs. "Always do the housework in the middle of the night?"

"Bridge," Mrs. Ayscough explained laconically. "Between Dad and his blessed cheroots and Bill Forsyte eating flaky pastry on the hoof, it's a toss-up which of them's messiest. I don't want crumbs and ash trodden in, thanks."

"Sorry," Ayscough repeated, "I forgot about the game. Not that I could have got back for it."

"No problem, Helen-next-door was glad to play. You only just missed them, the final rubber took ages." Mrs. Ayscough glanced in at the lounge carpets. "There, that's a good job, jobbed. Would you like cocoa or something stronger?"

"What? Oh, nothing, thanks." He sat on the oak chest in the hall, forehead crinkling. "You go on up, I . . ." He made a vague, circling gesture above his head—family sign language for "Don't be of-

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fended, I mean this in the nicest possible way, but shut up and leave me alone before I lose my thread."

The woman was pegging sheets on the line next morning under a wind-scrubbed blue sky when Superintendent Ayscough's car pulled up. "Early bird, eh?" she greeted him cheerily. For a widow with several rumbustious kids, a part-time job, and the care of an aged grandmother, Jane Estall was remarkably cheerful. Always had been; the superintendent had known her since she was a little girl . . .

"I need a quiet word with Min."

"Terrible business, the old chap killing himself." Jane took the last peg from her mouth and spoke more distinctly. "Go easy, Mr. A, she's right shaken up. I thought she was the toughest of us all, but Gran went right to pieces yesterday."

"I'll be discreet," he promised. "Min's no spring chicken, it was bound to upset her."

"Sounds sarky, but I believe she'll miss the job more than old Paine," said Jane Estall. "She manages nicely on the pension and we'll always help out, she doesn't need work. But she likes to be useful."

She lowered her voice. "I'm dreading it, between ourselves. She *will* help out, and she's . . . Gran is seventy-seven, whatever she says to the contrary. Maybe her rheumatics are worse than she lets on. Fingers like carrots, poor soul. Whatever it is, Gran's too slow to catch a cold, and clumsy with it. Crockery gets broken regular when she washes up. And now she'll be under my feet all the while, instead of at Mr. Paine's every other morning."

"Selfish of him not to consider that." But Ayscough winked as he said it, and Jane Estall retorted, "Cor, you're terrible . . . and so am I, moaning about her. Go in, I'll be there presently, make you a cuppa tea."

Min Kelly was in the kitchen when the superintendent joined her. Small, stooped, with a monkey face under thinning hair, the old lady suggested she-gnome rather than wicked witch.

"I told the other young man, over and over, I never took no cartridge case," she insisted. "Soon as I saw Mr. Paine, off I went to get help."

"Yes, but I doubt if Inspector Demarest thought to explain what a cartridge case looks like. It's a tiddy little joker, like a dolly's lipstick case, say. No more than this high."

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He was sitting across the kitchen table, which wasn't large. Min Kelly seemed to be glaring savagely, but it wasn't a badge of emotion, simply the effort of screwing up her eyes. . . .

Bob Ayscough hitched his chair back and asked softly, casually, "How many fingers am I holding up, dear?"

Her lips thinned, the glare turned stricken. But Min Kelly was among the last of a vanished generation, obedient to authority, resentful on occasion yet ever docile. Cornered, she stared, agonised, and snapped, "Just the one, can't catch me out, so there!"

"Half right," Ayscough agreed wryly, folding two fingers back against his palm. "Don't get yourself in a state, Min, but this really won't do. You are going to have to tell me what happened yesterday morning."

Mrs. Kelly talked, defensive and hesitant at first, then with more confidence. Twenty minutes later she finished, "That's the God's honest truth. Shall I be had up in court for perjury? Mind, I never touched that cartridge, never saw any such blessed thing."

Superintendent Ayscough went nose to nose with her so that she could read his face. "Nobody's going to court, Min. You were upset yesterday when they interviewed you. Now you've slept on it, and you want to amend your original statement. Somebody will be round for it later."

"What about your tea?" Jane Estall protested, encountering him on the way out.

"Drink it for me, luv. Places to go, people to see." In the car he contacted Landfield Central with a message to be passed on: Detective Inspector Demarest to meet him at Cedric Paine's bungalow, as soon as possible. "Tell him to bring his happy-snaps, he'll know what I'm on about."

As soon as Peter Demarest unlocked the bungalow's front door, the superintendent demanded, "Where's the vacuum cleaner?"

Standing aside, Demarest pointed through the door. "In the hall, where she left it. Well, somebody's unplugged it and tidied the flex, but it was just about where it is now. Nearer the middle of the hall, opposite the living room."

"That's all right, then." Ayscough was enjoying himself. "Let's have a gander at those pictures. Come through to the kitchen, we'll lay 'em out on the draining board.

"Now I'll show you a card trick," Ayscough chortled. There were ten Polaroids of the living room, and after cursory checking, he

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arranged them in two rows, four above, six below. "On top are the ones taken before you went in, the rest are from after. Yes, that information's on the back of the photos, but I didn't look there.

"I can tell which are which from the state of the carpet. I saw it yesterday, looked without seeing, when I peeped in at poor Ced'. My wife was Hoovering the front room when I got home last night—don't ask, the reason's boring. Seeing where she'd been working, the penny dropped."

He tapped the Before photographs. "You can see swathes where a vacuum's been used. Pushes the pile one way, and the light catches it, makes the strip show up. Unless the edges of the brushes make those lines. Doesn't matter, the marks are there. Especially on a new carpet. No sign of them in later snaps, though. Your chaps' feet had wiped the lines out by then.

"Min Kelly did Ced's housework, alternate days of the week. Bear in mind he spent most of his time in that lounge of his. Once he walked around a bit, the carpet would lose those cleaner-lines. But here they are, fresh as can be. *Meaning that whatever she told us, Min Kelly had run the cleaner over that carpet yesterday morning.*"

"Hellfire," Inspector Demarest exclaimed. "She lied, she *was* in here. Sweeping the carpet, with him dead in the corner? Are you saying she knocked him off and tidied up afterwards, some crazy idea of destroying evidence? Mrs. Kelly's a pensioner and not exactly bright—I can't see her shooting anyone."

"Not hardly," Ayscough agreed, suspiciously solemn.

Demarest's eyes sharpened again. "Ah, but she did take the spent cartridge case! To cover up for the real shooter. She knew who he was."

"Don't ride off in all directions, Peter. Try it a step at a time. My pace, 'cause I'm very nearly a pensioner and I haven't been very bright. So far." Superintendent Ayscough smirked, leaning against the sink and folding his arms to pontificate.

"Min told you she let herself in as usual yesterday. True. She had a key, because Ced' wouldn't hear her knocking if he was down the garden at the back there. She plugged the cleaner in, the flex is long enough to reach the whole of the living room from the hall. Still true.

"When she looked through the lounge door and saw Cedric dead in his chair, she stopped right there: False. Min couldn't see the far wall from that doorway, let alone somebody in the corner—she's

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nearly blind. Too proud, too anxious to be active at her age, to admit it. Hardly admits it to herself, for that matter.

"So she started sweeping the living-room carpet. Concentrating on the floor, head down. She admits now that Cedric was so still, she never noticed him, but *couldn't* notice until she was right on top of the corpse is nearer the mark. Anyway, she pushed the cleaner back and forth until she bumped it into his foot . . . that's what wrinkled his slipper. Must have been, when you think about it. And only then does the short-sighted Mrs. Magoo look hard at what she's bumped into, this unexpected obstruction."

Demarest, uncharacteristically, cursed softly. "Never trust civilians, the best of them tell lies. Still doesn't account for the silly old bat tampering with evidence—I mean, she must have taken the cartridge case."

"We-ell," Ayscough drawled, relishing the situation, "that's an interesting concept: Min fibbed, therefore she tampered. Interesting and wrong. She's had a hell of a shock. It would have been bad enough, finding her boss's corpse in his jammies when all she expected was a quiet morning's work with a nice cup of tea at half-time. . . . But she *didn't* see anything until she was right on top of Ced'. It was as if he'd jumped out at her and shouted 'Boo!'

"She panicked, scuttled back into the hall, dragging her cleaner after her. From what I can make out, she's ashamed of having run the cleaner into him. Amounted to desecrating a corpse in Min's book; disrespectful. The idea of telling a bunch of strangers, coppers at that, that she can hardly see her own hand at arm's length . . . She couldn't do that. Old folk get childish sometimes, and Min's one of 'em.

"Sooner than humiliate herself, she claimed not to have been in there at all. If she hadn't gone in, then she couldn't have been disrespectful to a dead man, trying to sweep him up with the rest of the rubbish, you follow?"

Unfolding his arms, he continued in much the same chatty tone, "Open that cupboard under the gas stove, Peter, it's where Ced' kept his old newspapers. *Daily Telegraph* will do nicely."

Inspector Demarest detached a double sheet of newsprint, earning, "Great stuff. Walk this way, sir, as they used to say in snooty department stores, and we shall see what we shall see. Stick the paper down there on the floor."

Joints cracking, Ayscough squatted beside the vacuum cleaner, unzipped its bag, and fumbled the paper lining out. "Why did Min

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take the cartridge case? She didn't, not knowingly. With her poor vision, she never saw it. The vacuum cleaner took it."

He upended the bag, dumping a fist-sized clot of fluff onto the newspaper and sneezing as a small cloud of dust arose. ("Bless you," Peter Demarest muttered, automatically.) Ayscough, wheezing, produced a ball-pen from his inside pocket to probe and tease the stuff apart.

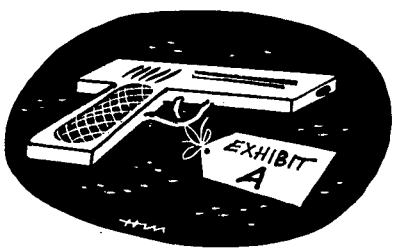
Increasingly embarrassed after spreading the heap into a wide circle, he sat back on his heels. "Lovely deduction, shame about the facts. You'll be able to dine out on this in the canteen, Peter. I guessed wrong."

Inspector Demarest, who had been craning over the dustpile, startled his boss by going down on one knee with the speed and ease of a seasoned churchgoer. "Wait a minute, there's a bit over here . . . Gotcha, you little beaut."

Using his own pen, a gold one, he had coaxed the minuscule brass cylinder from under a dried fragment of pot-plant leaf. Tucking the pen away, Demarest drew a long pin from behind his lapel to spear and lift the cartridge case.

Gloating over it, spreading the transparent plastic of an evidence pouch with his free hand, he spoke wonderingly. "It was here all the while, she swept it up before finding him. I was right—it wasn't her intention, but Mrs. Kelly covered for the killer. It was Paine, he *did* shoot himself."

Self-mockingly, Bob Ayscough said, "Never wrong, me. Didn't I tell you from the start it wasn't foul play?"



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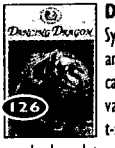

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

It's always interesting to know something about the environment in which an author works. Last year, in a letter accompanying this story, James Powell gave us this glimpse of the study in which he produces his unique and wonderful work. (We print a part of that letter with his permission.) "On Christmas Eve the small contingent of swans on the river was supplemented by an arrival of several hundred more. I saw a dozen fly up river a moment ago, looking like someone's clothesline was flying north. The windowpanes of the attic where I work are of very old glass, filled with warts, dimples, and blear. I'm sure the builders put the worst glass here. They deserve a bird watcher's curse . . ." Now another Christmas is upon us, and how could it be complete without a story of Scrooge and Marley?

THE TAMERLANE CRUTCH

by JAMES POWELL

Marley was dead, to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail. And when a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Ebenezer Scrooge, in nightcap, dressing gown, and slippers, took another swallow of lukewarm gruel before moving closer to the tiny fire in the grate. The fog creeping through the keyhole had brought the frosty night in with it. Staring down into the flames, the miser reviewed the events of the calamitous day. How had it all begun?

Early that cold, bleak morning while Scrooge sat busy in his countinghouse office, door ajar to keep an eye on his clerk, Bob

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Cratchit, who would rather warm his fingers at the candle than copy letters, the door to the foggy courtyard had flown open. The handsome middle-aged woman who stepped inside had gladsome and excited eyes although the golden hair that peeked from under her bonnet carried a heavy burden of silver. All this Scrooge caught in one glance before returning to his banker's book. Scrooge had nothing against a pretty face. But such a visitor at this season usually meant he was about to be dunned by another charity such as this year's madcap project to provide every poor, able-bodied child in London with an orange on Christmas morning and every crippled one with a crutch. Scrooge regretted having instructed Cratchit to turn such busybodies away. He should've handled the matter himself. "Are there no prisons?" he'd have asked. "And the Union workhouses, are they still in operation? The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour then?" And what could anyone answer to that?

He was interrupted from this pleasant reverie by Bob Cratchit. "A lady to see you, sir," said his clerk, adding a hasty, "on a matter of business."

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?" asked the woman in a musical voice.

"Marley has departed," said Scrooge, without rising from his stool.

"My name is Dirndl Wunderlich, Mr. Scrooge. I understand you are a miser, quite a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone."

Scrooge bowed modestly, at once pleased and made wary by the flattery.

"I have arrived in your country in search of a man, a Muscovite who has come into possession of an heirloom belonging to my family. I am prepared to pay you the sum of twenty guineas for its recovery."

Scrooge sighed. "Let us not waste our time, Madame," he said. "We misers are not in the business of recovering things belonging to others." As he spoke he searched among the papers on his desk until he found the address of Messrs. Spade and Archer, two gentlemen considerably in arrears in what they owed the countinghouse. Making a mental note never again to loan out money to a man who called him "Sweetheart," Scrooge said, "However, let me put you in touch with two private investigators who will handle this matter quite to your satisfaction."

"Such people do not work on Christmas Eve, Mr. Scrooge," insisted Dirndl Wunderlich. "Misers do. Indeed, I understand you are a master at the art of extracting your due by threatening people with the law. I wish to rent that skill."

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"For the sum of twenty guineas," added Scrooge.

The woman gave an eager nod. "Come, I'll lead you to the man this very minute. A while ago I left my hotel in search of a restaurant selling those new what-do-you-call-'ems, the fried meat patty on a bun."

Scrooge scowled. "Bah, hamburg," he said, for he did not care for London's latest eating craze.

Miss Wunderlich continued. "Anyway, by some stroke of luck, who should I see hobbling along in the fog ahead of me in Piccadilly Circus but my fat Muscovite. I followed at a distance, hoping he'd lead me back to his hotel where I could set someone like yourself on him. But he just kept walking around and around Piccadilly Circus. Finally I decided to chance it and dash here. If we move quickly . . ."

As she spoke the outer door flew open and there, an apparition against the palpable brown air swirling in the courtyard, stood a moaning figure with a face like a door knocker, a figure weighed down by chains, ledgers, padlocked cash boxes, and heavy purses wrought in steel. Scrooge had always regretted Marley's tendency to flaunt his miserliness. "My partner," he explained to Miss Wunderlich.

"The departed Marley's ghost!" she gasped.

"Hardly," said Scrooge. "Jacob departed for home a while back to get some hot salt in a black sock for his toothache." Indeed Marley sported such a poultice in a folded kerchief bound round his head and chin. "Come in, Jacob," invited Scrooge. As he outlined Miss Wunderlich's offer, he gestured at his ledgers and added, "I've got my hands full here. But a bad toothache'll put you in just the mood to shake a Muscovite loose from ill-gotten gains."

Marley rolled his eyes and, groaning like a spectre, he followed the woman back out into the fog.

Several hours later an astonished Scrooge was following a police constable's broad back through the cold, bleak, biting weather on his way to identify a murder victim believed to be his partner. Marley murdered? Jacob Marley dead?

The lamp outside the police station was a ruddy smear upon the fog. Inside, the day inspector stood like a maître d' beside his reservations book. That gentleman put down his pen and, giving Scrooge a look that said, "We know your kind, Mr. Scrooge. You'll get the table you deserve from us," he escorted the miser to an outbuilding

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in the yard where Marley's body lay, eyes weighted down with two large pennies. "Found in an alley behind the Bristol Hotel. Do you know it, sir?"

Scrooge nodded. "A fleabag."

The day inspector's solemn nod confirmed this. "You will note, sir," he continued, "that the victim was shot twice. Once in the ankle and once in the head. A peculiar thing that." Here the day inspector withdrew to give Scrooge a few moments to mourn his late partner.

Scrooge looked down at the dead body. Well, Jacob, he thought, you've been murdered. Tell me, what would you do about it if I was lying there and you were standing here? Nothing. There's no profit in sentiment. So why do I feel I should do something? Scrooge shrugged and, pocketing the two coins from the dead man's eyes as Marley would have done, he returned to the police station proper. The day inspector was waiting at the front door. As Scrooge passed, the man held out his palm without speaking. Scrooge dutifully deposited the two large pennies there. Yes, they did know him around here.

Outside, the fog and darkness had thickened. People ran about with flaring links, proffering their services to go before horses in carriages and conduct them on their way. Foggier yet, and colder! The gruffy old bell in the ancient tower of the church near the countinghouse struck the hour with tremulous vibrations as if its frozen teeth were chattering in its frozen head. In the main street before the courtyard, labourers repairing the gas pipes had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a ragged party of boys were gathered, warming their hands and winking their eyes before the blaze in rapture.

As Scrooge passed, a small man who had been watching these boys with considerable interest separated himself from the holly sprigs and berries of a poulterer's window and fell in step with the miser. "Mr. Scrooge," said the man in a high-pitched, thin voice, "my name is Niles Truck. I am trying to recover a crutch that has been—shall we say?—mislaid. I thought, and hoped, you could assist me."

Scrooge looked Truck up and down. He was a small-boned dark man of medium height with Levantine features. He wore gloves of yellow leather, fawn half-gaiters, and a tight wool coat. The miser shook his head. "A person mislays a bumbershoot or a parasol or a walking stick," he insisted. "Not a crutch."

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"Nevertheless, I'm prepared to pay one hundred guineas for its recovery," said Truck, as they turned into the countinghouse courtyard. "No questions asked."

"Who says I've got your damn crutch?" snapped Scrooge.

Truck answered by ramming a blunderbuss's barrel into the miser's kidneys. "Please clasp your hands together behind your neck," ordered the Levantine, prodding the miser forward through the countinghouse's chill outer room to the chill inner office. With whining complaints about the English climate, Truck tried to light the candle with a trembling match.

Scrooge chose that moment to spin around, knock the blunderbus aside, and apply the Penny Pincher's Nerve Pinch, one of the finest moves in the misers' martial arts arsenal. Truck slumped where he stood, the weapon slipping from his fingers. Holding the man up with one hand, Scrooge rummaged through his pockets with the other, dumping their contents on the ledger open on his sloping desk. Then he forced Truck up onto a high stool and left him to recover. Rummaging through the items on the desk he found a Greek passport that identified Truck as a currant merchant. (Scrooge wondered if the man ever dealt in a new strain called the Humboldt, having himself lost a bundle a year or two ago investing in Humboldt currant futures. "Bah, Humboldt," he scowled.) The contents of the pockets also included a paper cone of violet pastilles and an advertising broadside. Sucking on a pastille, Scrooge perused the announcement for the Christmas pantomime entitled "Ali Bow-Wow and the Forty Fleas," to be performed by the resident company in the lobby of the Bristol Hotel. Here Truck groaned, stirred, and might have fallen from his perch if Scrooge hadn't cuffed him awake. "All right, Mr. Truck," he snarled. "Spill everything or you'll get another taste of the pinch."

Truck licked his lower lip nervously. Then the thin high-pitched words came tumbling out. "I was taking my morning constitutional in Piccadilly Circus when I saw her, Dirndl Wunderlich, the woman who stole the Tamerlane Crutch from me."

"The what?" demanded Scrooge.

"A priceless jewel-studded crutch with a provenance lost in the mists of history," said Truck, adding in a voice turned shrill, "But it belongs to me. It's mine! I paid for it with three years of shame, humiliation, and . . ." Strong emotion choked off the Levantine's words. He breathed deeply several times and went on in a more subdued voice. "Keeping my distance, I followed the thieving woman

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around and around Piccadilly Circus for a good hour hoping she'd lead me to the crutch. But our first stop was when she broke off and led me here. Then I followed her and this old guy wearing a lot of chains and cash boxes back to Piccadilly Circus. They headed off to a run-down part of town and a hotel called the Bristol. Well, I waited in the street but they never reappeared. They must've slipped out the back." As he spoke Truck poked two fingers under his shirt and scratched absently. "So I came back here, hoping to pick up her trail again. I . . ." Truck's eyes followed Scrooge's gaze as it moved from his scratching fingers to the broadside about Ali Bow-Wow and the Forty Fleas.

"You lying Levantine ankle-shooter," snarled Scrooge, knocking the little man off the stool with a backhand slap. "You followed Marley into the hotel and out the back door. First you shot him in the ankle so he couldn't escape. Then you reloaded and shot him in the head." Scrooge advanced on the prostrate man. "Listen," he said, "when a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any—"

"But why would I shoot him in the ankle first?" whined Truck, pushing himself backwards along the floor with his heels. "Why wouldn't I just shoot him in the head and get it over with?"

Scrooge stopped. The man had a point.

Truck sat up and rubbed his cheek. "Boy, I don't know how that 'ankle-shooting Levantine' crack ever got started. We really aren't that way," he insisted. "But you're right, Mr. Scrooge. After a bit I did go into the hotel lobby. There was a very shaggy dog dressed in a big green turban and a red vest lying in one corner of the lobby while a modest crowd stared at it through rented magnifying glasses. When I saw the place had a back door to it I hurried out into the alley. But they were long gone. Then I saw a foot sticking out of the doorway. It was your partner, dead as a doornail."

"And where does the fat Muscovite fit in?"

Truck's olive features took on a grey cast and his eyes filled with fear. He scrambled to his feet. "Gutmanov? Gutmanov here?"

Jabbing a bony finger into Truck's chest, Scrooge urged, "Do yourself a big favour. Tell me what's going on."

Truck thought a bit. Then he shrugged and told his story. If the man was to be believed, he had spent his life tracking the whereabouts of a mysterious object called the Tamerlane Crutch, collecting and cataloguing any shred of information, each rumour, and every story, no matter how wild. Suddenly one day all signs pointed

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to the island of Malta where a reclusive multimillionaire named Constantine lived with his very extensive crutch collection—no two alike—kept from rival collectors in a well-guarded vault deep in the cellars of his impregnable home. But Truck thought he'd concocted a way to penetrate the Constantine vault. To this end he spent three years touring the Mediterranean as a receiver with a troupe of low vaudevillians. Night after night he took custard pies in his face, was beaten about the head with rubber chickens, and endured having his suspenders snipped with big shears to expose his bright underdrawers. At last the troupe was booked into Malta's Valletta Opera House. Constantine had a box seat for opening night for, as Truck had calculated, any man with so large a collection of rubber crutches would be a big fan of low vaudeville and could be expected to come backstage after the performance to meet the cast. But to Truck's dismay he saw Dirndl Wunderlich in the audience. If she'd followed him to Malta, then Gutmanov, the fat Muscovite, couldn't be far behind. Truck had no time to lose. After the performance he showed enough interest in rubber crutches to earn an invitation to see Constantine's collection that very night.

The vault resembled a curative religious shrine, with crutches hanging everywhere. After putting Constantine and the heavily armed watchman in stitches by stumbling around with rubber crutches in his armpit, Truck was rewarded with a conducted tour of the collection. The object he coveted so much was not behind glass with the finer pieces. Disguised with black paint, it stood among others in an open barrel labelled "Assorted Novelty Items." The crutch was tagged: "Fifteenth-century item from Samarkand vicinity. Black enamel over raised baguette and cabochon design."

As he bid the millionaire good night Truck mentioned he had a crutch, an old family heirloom, which he would like to donate to the collection. When Constantine expressed interest Truck rushed back to his hotel and, working from memory, built a reasonable facsimile of the crutch in the barrel. "Fifteenth-century Samarkand, you say?" said the doubtful collector the next evening. "Well, I could be wrong, but I think I've got one of those. But let's take a look." Back down in the vault, the millionaire quickly located the crutch in the barrel. "Thank you very much, young man," said Constantine with a shake of his head. "But 'no two alike' is my motto." Then, while the watchman tried to doze in his chair in the corner and Constantine demonstrated some of his finer musical crutches, Truck deftly switched his imitation for the real Tamerlane Crutch.

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Back out on the narrow winding street it seemed to Truck that every passerby's glance pierced the crutch's black enamel to the treasure beneath, every shadow harboured a gang of thieves, and each footstep behind him spoke menace. He sought out the brighter streets and came back to his hotel by a roundabout way. But as he stepped inside his room he was struck a great blow on the head. When he recovered consciousness, the crutch was gone. The smell of Dirndl Wunderlich's edelweiss perfume still hung in the air. So the Levantine set out after her, and his search had brought him to London.

At the conclusion of the story Scrooge showed Mr. Niles Truck the door, saying, "You want your damn crutch? Be at my apartment tonight at the stroke of twelve." Then, alone, he rubbed his stubbly chin and resolved to discover the identity of Marley's killer. A man should certainly do what he can to help a murdered partner find rest—provided it didn't cost him anything. Would Truck come at the appointed hour? If he did, Scrooge suspected that Dirndl Wunderlich and the fat Muscovite wouldn't be far behind.

Scrooge took another sip of gruel, scowled, and spat it into the fire. The damn stuff was stone cold. How long had he been sitting there? And why did misers have to drink gruel? Why not a whiskey of the Scottish persuasion? Scrooge had to smile at himself. No. Gruel came with the miser territory. He'd known that from the start. Years ago, whenever his schoolmates talked about what they'd be when they grew up, he'd always said, "A miser." How they'd laughed! Yet one of them wanted to be a surgeon and cut people up, and another a soldier and blow strangers' arms off, and a third a judge who'd make men dance at the end of a rope.

Scrooge pulled still closer to the fire but found small comfort there until among the little tongues of flame another scene from the past came to life again. He saw himself, Scrooge the young man, sitting in a bower with a beautiful young woman. It was Belle! Dearest Belle. No, he'd never forget that moment. She had just broken off their engagement. She wouldn't marry an aspiring miser. "But, Belle," he'd insisted, "you should love a man for what he is, not how he makes his livelihood. Come marry me. Be a miser's wife and live in a miser's house with all the miser's little children running around inside. Oh, what fun we'll have!" But Belle didn't share Scrooge's conviction that miserliness and laughter could go hand in hand. Had she been right? Could Scrooge's whole life have been a mistake?

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At first, after their breakup, he'd fallen in with a crowd of young spendthrifts and prodigals. Who else would accept a man who never bought a round of drinks or picked up a dinner check? And when Scrooge's companions grew low on money he obligingly loaned them funds at as reasonable rates as they'd have found anywhere. But that man spoke true who said there was no better way to lose friends than by lending them money. Yes, being a miser proved a lonelier life than he'd expected. So he'd gone into partnership with Marley, thinking two misers might get along famously. But Dutch treat was tedious. Bah, humdrum, thought Scrooge. Yet in his heart of hearts he still thought that misers could have fun, too.

Suddenly the chimes of a neighbouring church struck twelve and roused Scrooge from his reverie. He'd left the apartment door unlocked for Truck. But even before the chimes died away the miser heard a foot and an active crutch approaching from room to room. Suddenly the door flew open and an immensely fat man with glossy cheeks, a tall fur hat, and one foot swathed in bandages limped into the room with the help of a black crutch. The man's face brightened when he saw Scrooge. "Allow me to introduce myself, sir. I am Caspar Gutmanov. We begin well, sir. A man who locks his door reveals a suspicious nature. Suspicion breeds treachery." The Muscovite looked around the room warily. "I'd hoped to find Mr. Niles Truck here. He must've given me the slip along the way."

"I thought he'd get here first, too," admitted Scrooge, gesturing the fat man into a chair. "Without him to lead you, I'm surprised you knew where to come."

"Fortunately I saw a door knocker down below that was the image of your partner Jacob Marley."

Scrooge bowed to the man's power of observation. Then he suggested, "If Truck's given you the slip, maybe he's figured out the Piccadilly Circus business, too."

"Gad, dovechick, you amaze me," smiled the Muscovite with admiration. "Yes, perhaps you're right. A droll thing, the Piccadilly Circus business. You see, this is the season when I most like to lug my belly out into the streets, gouty foot and all, if that curse is upon me. I really want the little people to see me as they rush about with their widow's mites and sweaty farthings, trying to scrape something together for Christmas. I want them to know that every single night of the year I consume ten of their petty Christmas dinners. Yes, I like that. But today as I walked in Piccadilly Circus who should I see mincing along ahead of me but Niles Truck, the

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very man I outwitted to obtain this." Gutmanov banged his crutch on the floor. "To see what he was up to, I trailed him around and around Piccadilly Circus and then to your countinghouse, where I discovered Truck was following a disgruntled ex-employee of mine, a Miss Wunderlich. When she and your partner Jacob Marley hurried back to where we'd started with Truck on their tail I followed along behind. After we'd made two or three more swings around Piccadilly Circus, I following Truck and Truck following Miss Wunderlich, I realized to my amazement that Miss Wunderlich was following me. How could I elude her without losing Truck? I decided to lead the way to the Hotel Bristol, an establishment which has a rear entrance. By slipping out the back and hobbling around to the front, I hoped to escape her while taking up position behind Truck. But Marley knew about the back door. Out in the alley he shouted to Miss Wunderlich, 'You go that way. I'll go this,' so I ducked into a doorway hoping he'd walk right by."

"But he didn't," said Scrooge. "So you shot him in the ankle with that pistol you've got hidden in your foot bandages. When he fell to the ground you reloaded and shot him in the head. But you won't get away with it. I'll see to that. Listen, when a man's partner's killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what—"

"Dovechick," said Gutmanov, "I could've killed your partner with one shot. Nothing easier. He was a miser, after all." Scrooge's incredulous laughter made the fat man shrug. Then, as if to change the subject, he said, "Ah, my dear fellow, I believe you've dropped a sixpence there on the floor."

Scrooge bent over quickly. Then, with his cheek against the floor, he found himself staring down the barrel of the bandaged foot. The Russian's heels were cocked. Scrooge knew that by tapping them together the man could trigger the hidden gun.

"Yes, I could've killed Marley," smiled Gutmanov. "But I just wounded him in the ankle. I wanted to get out of there and get back on Truck's trail."

Scrooge glared at the man. "A crime like that could mean transportation to New South Wales. Sydney."

"Capital," chortled the fat man. "Very well, call the police. I am an agent of the Tsar of Russia. All they can do is deport me and my crutch back to my homeland." He smiled at the thought, stroked the black enamel, and said, "Let me tell you about this crutch. Four hundred years ago a mighty warrior called Tamerlane or Timur the

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Lame held sway over all the lands and people from the Volga to the Persian Gulf and from Hellespont to the Ganges. After each of his great military victories his subjects presented him with a ceremonial crutch decorated with precious inlay and priceless gems, but none more sumptuous than the one after his defeat of the Ottoman Sultan Bazajet, whom Tamerlane afterwards carried about with him imprisoned in an iron cage for all to see." While he spoke Gutmanov took out a pocket knife and began to scrape at the black enamel as if to prove his words. "So valuable was this crutch, that even Tamerlane, who was not shy about such things, wrapped it in tissue paper and put it away for special occasions. Perhaps this was why it alone survived the turmoil following Tamerlane's death.

"Oh, many like Niles Truck have pursued the crutch across the centuries just for the monetary worth of the thing. My Imperial Master cares little for that. But he knows that every wild tribe from Samarkand southward would follow the man who possessed this symbol of ancient authority to hell and beyond. With the Tamerlane Crutch as our battle flag Russia will sweep down through India, conquer Burma, and, avoiding the invincible defenses of the Great Wall, strike a mortal blow at China's soft underbelly."

Here the fat man brushed away the enamel scrapings to reveal a bright blue jewel. He purred approvingly and continued his story. "Well, if anyone was going to learn the whereabouts of the crutch, I knew it would be Truck. So I hired people to keep a constant watch on him, not least among them Miss Wunderlich. The night he stole the crutch I was waiting for him outside Constantine's and followed him back to his hotel. But I found him unconscious on the floor of his room, the crutch at his side. I took it and fled across the rooftops, hurrying down to the harbour where I signed on as a deckhand aboard a ship bound for London under charter to the Valletta Crutch and Citrus Exporting Company."

Here Gutmanov offered the crutch for Scrooge's examination. But he stopped abruptly and frowned down at it. With a loud curse he fell to scraping wildly, his fat face trembling like an outraged pudding. Then he dropped the crutch, moaning, "They're not jewels! They're violet pastilles!"

The clatter of the crutch had scarcely died away when Truck appeared in the doorway, blunderbuss drawn. "You will please clasp your hands behind your necks, gentlemen," hissed the Levantine. Keeping his eyes fixed on them, he came into the room and picked up the crutch. Fondling it lovingly, he told Gutmanov, "When I

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heard you behind me in the fog, I ducked into an alley and let you get ahead of me. But before I could kill you and take my treasure, you turned in here." Truck aimed his weapon at the fat Muscovite's chest. "Well, when it comes to dying, one place is as good as . . ." Suddenly Truck felt the stickiness of the pastilles in his warm fingers. He looked down. "But this isn't the Tamerlane Crutch," he whined indignantly. "It's my fake!"

High heels approached through the apartment. "Quick, you two," urged Scrooge, "into that room over there." They obeyed, Truck handing over the crutch so the gouty Muscovite could hobble quickly across the floor. The door had scarcely closed when Dirndl Wunderlich, erect and alert, swept into the room. But when she saw Scrooge was alone she faltered and, it seemed to Scrooge, her hair took on more silver. Then she got a grip on herself. "I'm sorry about what happened to Marley," she said. "I didn't know Gutmanov was armed. You lost a partner. I lost my last chance to hit it big."

"The Tamerlane Crutch, you mean?" asked Scrooge. "Was that why you killed Marley?"

Dirndl Wunderlich turned those wonderful eyes on him for a moment. Then she said, "All right, I killed him." She licked her lips anxiously. "Look, there he was writhing on the ground, one hand around his ankle, the other holding onto that damn toothache of his. And me with the priceless crutch slipping from my grasp. I shouted for him to tell me which way Gutmanov'd gone. But his own pain was all he was thinking of. In a rage I gave him one of Mother Wunderlich's Lead Toothache Pills right in the noggin." She hung her head contritely. "I guess the laugh was on me because later I realized we'd all been following each other. I didn't have to kill Marley. By sticking close to Truck I'd have been sure to pick up Gutmanov's trail again. But now they've both given me the slip. It's all over."

"Why tell me?" asked Scrooge.

"Because I'm not as young as I used to be," said Dirndl Wunderlich. "Because I need to settle down in some cozy little business. You're short one partner. I've got a little money set by and some jewels. I could get the hang of misering. 'Scrooge and Wunderlich,' doesn't that have a lilt to it? Of course, that'd just be around the office. At home it'd be Ebenezer and Dirndl, Dirndl and Ebenezer. What do you say?"

Ebenezer and Dirndl? Damn, Scrooge liked the sound of it. Could life be granting him this one last chance to grab his dream of miser

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happiness? Perhaps. But first he had to explain that she'd killed his partner for a piece of wood studded with violet pastilles.

Dirndl's eyes grew wide as he spoke. Now they narrowed. "Listen," she said, "that night in Malta when the Tamerlane Crutch was stolen Gutmanov had ordered me to stand watch outside Truck's hotel. I remember seeing this skulky type wearing a long cape and a slouch hat down over his eyes slip into the hotel. I even remember remarking to myself, 'Dirndl, there goes a cape big enough to hide a crutch under.' At first I thought it was Truck. But he showed up a few minutes later, crutch and all. Gutmanov arrived a bit later, just in time to pass the man in the cape coming out of the hotel. Now my little plan had been to wait for the fat Muscovite to come back out and then trade him one of Mother Wunderlich's Lead Barter Tokens for the Tamerlane Crutch. But Gutmanov skipped out over the rooftops. When I finally went up to Truck's room the little man was unconscious on the floor and the crutch was gone."

"I don't get it," admitted Scrooge.

"What's to get? Constantine spotted the switch, beat Truck back to the hotel, knocked him out, and switched the crutches back. But Gutmanov didn't know that. When he found Truck unconscious he stole the fake. That means Constantine's still got the real one."

There was a blunderbuss play in the other room. When Dirndl and Scrooge burst through the door they found the fat Muscovite dead on the floor under the open window, with the Levantine's body stretched across his. "Looks like they heard you," said Scrooge. "Gutmanov tried to get a head start for Malta. Truck stopped him dead but made the mistake of leaning over his victim to make sure. Gutmanov still had a heel tap left in his gouty foot."

"But don't you see what this means?" cried Dirndl. "That means we're the only ones left who know where the Tamerlane Crutch is."

"Except for Constantine," insisted Scrooge.

"I rather think Mr. Constantine thought he was just getting one of his crutches back from some thieving collector," said Dirndl. "No, only you and I know it's the Tamerlane Crutch. We'll work the years necessary to get another crack at it."

Suddenly Scrooge understood. "You mean custard pies and the whole bit?"

"A small price to pay," said Dirndl. "The Tamerlane Crutch'll make us the miser Emperor and miser Empress of India and China. And, oh, what fun we'll have!"

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Scrooge smiled sadly. No, it was too late for that now. "Listen, Dirndl," he said, "when a man's partner's killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't—" Here there was a sound of many flat footsteps and policemen burst into the room. The clock said ten minutes to one. Scrooge muttered darkly. He'd told them to come at one on the dot. He handed Dirndl over to them, resigned that he'd never get to give his big speech.

Scrooge retired to his four-poster, snuffed out the candle flame, and fell into a sound sleep. But his late partner's spirit was not quite laid to rest. Scrooge dreamed that Marley's ghost took him by the elbow and, both invisible, they flew out of night's darkness into the brightness of Christmas Day and flitted all about the city looking in at revelers' windows. They watched the Lord Mayor, aided by his fifty cooks and fifty butlers, keeping Christmas as a Lord Mayor's household should. And they visited Camden Town and Bob Cratchit's little house where they found Scrooge's clerk serving up some hot mixture compounded with gin and lemons which simmered in a jug on the hob. "A toast!" he cried. "I give you Mr. Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast!"

What a fool Bob Cratchit was, thought Scrooge. Was there ever such a goose?

Here Tiny Tim, the Cratchits' little crippled son, tottering happily about the room with the charity crutch he'd found in his Christmas stocking, cried out a joyful, "God help us every one!"

Marley's ghost moaned agreement, squeezing Scrooge's forearm to draw attention to the crippled boy, his door knocker of a face giving his partner a meaningful look. Scrooge nodded. Yes, he understood.

Grinning eagerly, Jacob Marley's ghost rushed Scrooge away from the light of Christmas Day and back into the darkness from which they'd come.

Scrooge awoke from this crowded dream with the sunlight lying heavy on the floor of his bedroom, a smile on his face, and the sure conviction that he had smuggled a very important discovery from the land of sleep. But what had it been? Ah yes. All that flying about from window to window had inspired him. He'd design and market a contraption, a kind of magic window frame for the kingdom's poor to set in the middle of their modest living rooms and use it to peek in at the dining rooms of their betters. Yes, he, Ebenezer

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Scrooge, could bring about a frugal world where one goose could as good as feed ten thousand people and the nightly joys of one small prosperous jocular family could supply the domestic pleasure of an entire nation. And every few minutes tradesmen would pay Scrooge for the privilege of appearing in the window to hawk their wares. Scrooge was warming his hands at that happy thought when the whole thing evaporated as the fantasies of sleep do in the morning light. Magic window frames for the poor? What a far-fetched idea! What humbug! thought Scrooge.

The miser sat on the edge of the bed and shook his head, still haunted by his dream. Then he remembered old Marley's ghost pointing out Tiny Tim to him. That was it! With a whoop of joy Scrooge ran to the window, opened it, and put out his head. "You there," he called to a child he recognised who was passing by sucking on an orange. "You're the talkative boy, aren't you?"

"I'll tell the world," said the boy.

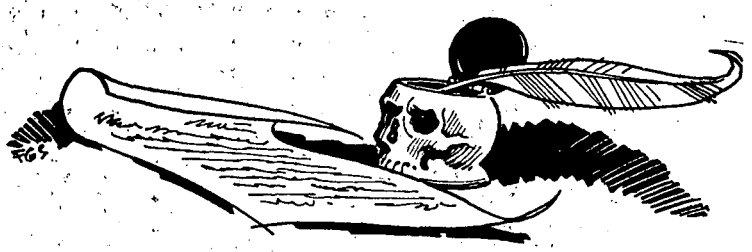
"An intelligent boy," declared Scrooge. "And do you know where my clerk, Bob Cratchit, lives?"

"I'll tell the world."

"Then run there at once. Tell him Mr. Scrooge says a crutch worth its weight in jewels was mistakenly mixed in among those distributed to the crippled poor this morning. Tell him to expect offers for Tiny Tim's crutch but not to sell it until Mr. Scrooge puts his bid in. Hurry now. There'll be sixpence in it for you if you get back here before I change my mind."

Scrooge closed the window and laughed out loud. Yes, within the hour all London would know the news and be bidding up those crutches. With one glorious lie Scrooge had accomplished more for the city's crippled poor than any charity subscription. And it hadn't cost him a penny.

"A Merry Christmas to us all!" cried the miser. Then with a gleeful laugh Ebenezer Scrooge, of Scrooge and Marley, leaped into the air and kicked his skinflint heels.



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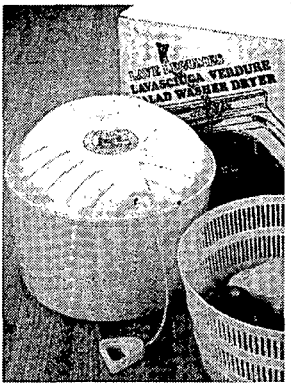
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL



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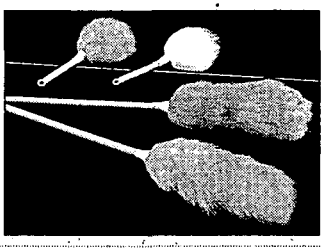

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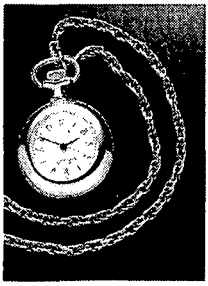

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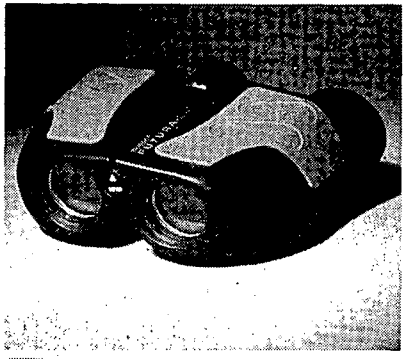

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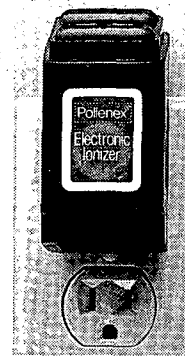

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Marlys Millhiser has come only lately to short mystery fiction, though she is a veteran of the long form, with nine crime novels in print. Her short-story debut can be found in the 1994 Malice Domestic IV anthology (Pocket Books). This second story employs characters introduced earlier, in Ms. Millhiser's 1992 book Murder at Moot Point. . . .

WAYNE'S UNCLE

by MARLYS MILLHISER

If it was hot in L.A. it was searing in Vegas. The desert seethed with wavy mirages, sun-flashing shards of broken glass, dumped autos, and concrete. And the discarded bodies of murder victims, if you could believe the newspapers.

But apparently not that of Wayne's uncle.

Charlie Greene pressed the accelerator to the floor and vowed to outlive the music her daughter selected on the radio.

Wayne's uncle had died at home, a three-bedroom bungalow, if you could believe Wayne. Charlie tended to be skeptical of everyone.

Charlie had called Wayne just yesterday, wanting to discuss ruby rings and chain letters. But murder had taken precedence.

She was a literary agent for Congdon and Morse, a talent agency in Beverly Hills, Wayne one of her clients. He lived in L.A. but visited his uncle when funds grew low.

"This can't be it," Charlie said when she pulled off the highway. "We're looking for a three-bedroom bungalow."

Libby looked up from the map—her eyes sparking angst, contempt, outrage, and all the terrible emotions a teen can pack into a look.

On one side of them a waterfall splashed over mossy rocks, on the other stood a guardhouse and guard. Across a brick and iron-bar fence, sprinklers hurled more water at a gated community named The Ferns. On the Nevada desert. At the edge of Las Vegas. Smack in the middle of the scorched earth.

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Charlie lowered her window as the guard bent to study them, his eyes slits of suspicion. Libby leaned across Charlie and said, "Charlie and Libby Greene for Wayne Fugelberg."

The slits widened. Charlie's daughter had that effect on men already. Which was why she was here. Charlie might as well not have been in the car. "We know about the murder," the kid explained regally. "We're expected."

The guard turned back to the guardhouse, displaying great sweat patches on his shirt. After a phone call he returned with a pass he slipped under the windshield wiper and gave directions to the Fugelberg house.

A woman in a black tent dress without sleeves met them at the door, her expression no more trusting than that of the guard. Large lumps of flesh hung about her neck and arms and ankles. She panted as she walked off to fetch Wayne but he appeared on his own from a door opposite.

"Charlie, love." Wayne Fugelberg was easily the most misnamed person Charlie had ever met—narrow perfect body and features, dark sleepy eyes, lazy smile, a velvet tone that stroked. "Just the person I need," he purred.

What you need, Wayne, my man, is an attorney.

Leopold Fugelberg had been repeatedly bashed over the head with Wayne's nine iron. Wayne was his principal heir.

"Where are the cops?" Libby demanded.

"Oh, never far—in and out," Wayne answered vaguely and insisted upon showing them around.

The three-bedroom bungalow had twenty-foot ceilings and marble everywhere—floors, fireplaces, bathroom fixtures, and pool decking. Charlie's patio and the first floor of her condo would fit in one of the bedrooms, and she was never tempted to show people around it.

The marble mausoleum was frigid.

"Uncanny, your calling yesterday." Wayne led them finally to chairs at poolside. "Uncle Leo hadn't been dead two hours." Wayne wore a western shirt, leather vest, black pants, and a caballero hat. The white tennis shoes jarred.

Charlie, grateful to be back out in the heat, watched the sprinklers fling water at the golf course surrounding the cluster of pricey homes. "So, did your uncle die of freezing to death in a heat wave?"

Apparently the housekeeper, Sue Sandifer, suffered from the heat and kept adjusting the thermostat. She looked about as much like

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a Sue as he did a Wayne. As if cued, Sue appeared with frosty glasses of iced tea. An aging white woman—forced to serve others—lame, with one foot turning inward until she nearly walked on the inside of it. She looked defeated, resentful, and certainly not in mourning. Then again, neither did Wayne. He proudly introduced Charlie as his agent. Writers tended to do that. Sue limped into the house, unimpressed.

Libby took her glass off across the pool deck to pose in languid disgust, and Charlie turned on her client. "Since when do you have the money to give away ruby rings for twenty bucks?" she asked in a low voice. "And paintings and—" And why didn't you tell me you stood to become rich? I wouldn't have agonized so about not being able to sell your stuff.

Wayne'd had some minor success with western scripts. But westerns weren't doing well at the moment and, Charlie had assumed, neither was Wayne. "You realize chain letters are against the law."

"I know it was wrong, but I borrowed a few things from Uncle Leo when I was housesitting, had them copied. Charlie, he never knew—I returned them before he got home. It's the murder that matters now."

"I resent your using our relationship that way. You not only sent one to Libby but to Gloria Tuschman." Gloria was the receptionist at Congdon and Morse and a dip of the first order.

Yesterday when Charlie arrived at the agency Gloria stopped tapping away at computer keys with two pencil stubs (to protect clawlike fingernails) long enough to show off a ring with a red stone to match her dress, nails, and lipstick. With her frizzed and blackened hair and milk-white skin she looked like Snow White wearing the apple.

"That chain letter you said was a scam? This is what I got for sending on the twenties," Gloria had announced triumphantly. "Wayne sent Libby one. You might concentrate your powers on whether she'd lose out by breaking the chain. You have a way with things—"

"I do *not* have a way with things." One of Gloria's innumerable half-baked notions was that Charlie was some sort of psychic. If she were, she'd have come in the back way that morning and avoided the witch altogether.

"My husband took it to two jewelers on Rodeo. It's real, Charlie."

"Charlie," Wayne leaned toward her now, sun glare from pool ripples flashing off his sunglasses, "no one actually claimed it was a real ruby. . . . I was desperate for a little cash."

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"Gloria's ring is worth a fortune, Wayne." Most of Charlie's writers were desperate.

After a long pause, and sounding as if he were talking through water, he said, "So that's where . . . you're sure?"

"Two different jewelers on Rodeo Drive are. I don't know what more you want."

"I assumed I was the only heir. The scheme seemed harmless enough." His eyes followed Libby as she stooped to examine some marble stairs leading out to the golf course.

Don't even think about it, Fugelberg. "So, who are the other heirs?"

Wayne inherited the bulk of his uncle's estate, but Sue was to receive a condominium in nearby Henderson, the painting, the ruby ring, and the Sara Lee stock. "Couldn't you switch rings for me, love?"

"No, I couldn't." Charlie also couldn't have told you why she liked Wayne. "But at least you're not the only suspect."

"He gave me the clubs so I could play when visiting him. I keep them here. My fingerprints are all over the one that killed him. They're all over all of them."

Photos of Uncle Leo displayed about the house had shown him to be bald and round with a jolly, jowly face.

"They've taken the nine iron, but I can show you the others and where it happened." Even on such a subject his tone soothed. "Anything to get you started."

"Wayne, I didn't come here to solve any murder."

"Then why did we have to come?" Libby spat from across the marble deck.

"I thought I could be here for you, offer moral support," Charlie told her client and added under her breath for him alone, "and Libby was invited to a party this weekend I didn't like the sound of."

Wayne's lustrous smile in a dark face said he didn't believe a word. "Well, as long as you're here, love . . ."

The golf clubs appeared perfectly ordinary. The bag was made of leather and badly weather stained. Uncle Leo had met his end in a pool of blood on the marble steps. Because dead bodies and fluid evidence degenerate quickly in sun and heat, the crime scene technicians had worked fast and taken the yellow tapes down and Uncle Leo away before noon yesterday. But Charlie noticed the outlines of blood smears on the marble steps.

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The house next door was in the finishing stages of construction and a grown palm tree lay on a flat-bed truck, its wrapped fronds making it resemble the mother of all asparaguses, roots encased in a mammoth box, a huge womb of a hole waiting.

"I was still in bed when the workmen backed the truck up to the hole and found him. Sue walked from the gate shortly before that, came in the front without seeing anything." The housekeeper had arrived on a shuttle that transported working people from more arid sections of desert.

"Well, what do you think? You do have a way with these things."

"I do *not* have a way with these things." Damn Gloria.

"I told Detective Slotkin about you. He seemed interested. It was in the papers only a few days ago where a psychic found the bones of four different bodies out on the desert."

"So why *did* we come here?" With her platinum-blond hair tied in a knot on top of her head, Libby stuffed quarters into the slot next to the color monitor in the bar to play video poker and get Charlie and the bartender at the Flamingo arrested. At least she was drinking Coke.

"You're forever saying you want to come to Vegas for a weekend. And I felt bad for Wayne."

"Mom, you are so anal, I worry about you."

Charlie was drinking wine and also playing poker. Rows of flashing slots surrounded the bar and green-coated tables, where men with hard eyes watched you without ever quite meeting yours. The whorehouse decor, rippling circus lighting, garish sound and color toiled to sustain a frenzy of excitement.

A man slid onto the stool next to Libby and flipped his wallet open to an ID, and Charlie's heart came to rest in her throat. Libby gave a world-weary sigh and glided off into the ether of beeps, honks, and clanking metal tokens.

"Detective Slotkin, homicide, metro. Ted." He watched Charlie's kid wander off and turned back to Charlie. "You must have had her young."

Most of us unwed moms did. "Hi."

"Mr. Fugelberg told me you're staying here. I understand you and your daughter visited him this afternoon."

Charlie relaxed. He was here about murder, not underage gambling. But she wished Libby's monitor would quit blinking. "Yes, I'm Wayne's literary agent."

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Ted Slotkin was sleek, well tailored. Charlie wondered if he modeled on the side. More and more good-looking cops supplemented meager incomes that way. They had a certain gritty panache rarely found in professional models.

Charlie's attention roamed until she found the platinum topknot and came back suddenly to the homicide detective. "What do you mean who do I think killed Leopold Fugelberg? You're the professional."

"Wayne Fugelberg says you . . . sense things."

"I just came to Vegas because it was the weekend and I thought he could use a friend. Look, if I were sensitive to things, I'd win at gambling, right?"

"Nah, if psychics could detect the fix they'd have put the strip out of business years ago." He leaned across Libby's stool and said rapidly, as if to startle an answer from her, "The nephew or the housekeeper? Which one?"

If Wayne murdered his uncle and believed Charlie was psychic why would he have been so hot for her to come to Vegas?

"They both had motive, opportunity, and strength." Even Slotkin's eyebrows looked blow-dried.

They both needed money, but Sue needed it sooner. She couldn't be much younger than the victim. Besides, Charlie liked Wayne. She didn't care much for Sue.

"But if the nephew did it," sleek Slotkin continued when he tired of watching her think, "why didn't he wipe his prints off the weapon?"

Sue might have been in on the chain letter. Libby's potential prize was going to be a painting. A housekeeper would notice if a painting was out being copied. Could they both be in on the murder too? Charlie had the feeling Wayne didn't believe in psychics any more than she did. Was she to be a diversion? Writers could be slippery. They led too many lives.

"Your client's theory is workmen next door were dealing drugs and good old Uncle caught them at it. What do you think, Charlie Greene?"

Charlie thought bopping somebody over the head with a nine iron where anyone passing could see you do it was a sudden act of rage rather than a carefully planned murder. You didn't need to be psychic to figure that out. But once the deed was committed you had to do something to try to cover your tracks. And it would probably be clumsy because you didn't have time to think it through.

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"I think somebody planned to throw the body in that hole and cover it up just enough so the palm tree would be planted on it, but they didn't have time." The homicide detective stood and handed her his card. "Thanks for all the help. If you think of anything more please give me a call."

"Wait," Charlie finally spoke, "why did you come here in the first place?" She gave him her thirty-five-millimeter smile.

He grinned. "Some of the men in homicide are all torqued over that psychic who found the bones on the desert a few days ago. When they heard that Fugelberg thought you were one they dared me to check it out. Ever date cops?"

"Like, there must have been a lot of blood," Libby said on the way home the next day. She slanted a quick sideways glance at Charlie that said for once the kid wasn't so sure of herself. "All over the steps. I mean, it's gross."

"I'm sorry, honey, I should have known better than to bring you."

"You'd think it'd be all over somebody's clothes," Libby said, characteristically ignoring Charlie's answer.

Monday morning, Charlie was again stopped by Gloria Tuschman, this time in high hysterics because Wayne demanded his ring back. She actually shed tears, some of which reached her dress—a silky number, red as usual. Charlie watched the stains spread for several blinks and fished in her purse for Detective Slotkin's card and phone number.

"Look, it probably doesn't mean anything," she told him, "but where were Wayne's golf bag and his uncle's found when you first got there? Were they wet?"

"In the garage and damp in spots. Not washed-out bloodstain spots if that's what you're after. You still haven't told me if you date cops."

"Have you found any bloodstained clothes?"

"I got people searching the desert. We'll find them."

"Palm tree planted yet?"

"Yeah . . . why?" Long pause you could almost hear the anger growing in. "Shit!"

"Look for sandals or cowboy boots." Wayne wouldn't wear white tennis shoes if you held a gun to his head. They must have been his uncle's. "I think Wayne had help." Charlie explained the chain-letter scam. "And Detective Slotkin, I did date a cop once."

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* * *

Wayne Fugelberg admitted killing his uncle when Sue Sandifer accepted a plea bargain and probation for testifying against him. Leopold Fugelberg had discovered the copying of the ring when it was reappraised and decided to change his will leaving out Wayne and Sue. He informed Wayne of this as they left the house for an early game before the heat of the day, and Wayne lost it right there.

Sue arrived in time to throw Wayne's bloodied clothes in the palm tree pit and shovel some dirt back on top of them. The workmen arrived with the tree before she noticed the nine iron next to the body. She'd panicked, grabbed both golf bags, and ran to the garage to put them back. At the last minute they decided to lay the blame on the workers. Wayne offered to split his uncle's fortune down the middle if she helped him. If you could believe the housekeeper.

Gloria insisted Charlie's "powers" had revealed all even though Charlie explained she'd guessed Wayne's clothes might be under the palm because there wasn't time to dump them in the desert. "The whole business looked hurried and improvised."

Hell, if you hadn't planned the murder, you hadn't had time to think up the alibi.

"How do you know Gloria wasn't right all along?" Libby asked the other day, simply to be irritating. "How did you know if the stains on the golf bags were wet it meant anything? Or Wayne wasn't in bed like he said? This deduction stuff doesn't cut it. You're not that bright."

"The fact that both bags were damp suggested Wayne and his uncle were going or had been out for a game. The sprinklers are on all the time someplace trying to keep things green. And the golf course comes practically up to the marble steps. The bags must have been dropped in the wet grass in the violence."

"Mo-om, that still doesn't explain how you would know the stains on the bags meant something when the police didn't. Know what your problem is?" And Libby poked an elegant finger into Charlie's forehead. "You have a closed mind."

Charlie gave up. She was the most skeptical person she knew, yet the only "rational" explanation for her ability to solve the murder of Wayne's uncle was that she was psychic.

If you could believe Charlie's daughter. ●

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Under the bylines Bill James, David Craig, and James Tucker, the writer of the following satire has garnered not only a growing readership but enthusiastic reviews in both the United States and Britain. Mr. James has a voice of his own, but be prepared: his language is ribald and his wit acerbic . . .

BODY LANGUAGE

by BILL JAMES

One Tuesday afternoon, when Professor Cameron Phelps was nearing the end of his lecture to a Contemporary Fiction class on The Detective Story in Modern Novel and Film, a man he certainly recognised from drinks parties given by the English Society a while back suddenly appeared in the doorway near him, stood for a moment scanning the undergraduates, then stepped forward, pointing some sort of handgun at Geraldine Marques, sitting two students in on the third row, and shot her through the head, shot her twice.

When the first bullet hit her, Geraldine's face did not disintegrate or explode, as that hanging melon does on screen during the famous target practice scene in *The Day of the Jackal,* but it certainly seemed to Cameron to lose all the conventional qualities and lineaments of a face. For what might have been a quarter of a second one of those looks of surprise, and yet at the same time of almost serene resignation, which in quite a few thrillers comes over the features of those about to be wasted, did register around Geraldine's eyes. That, though, must have been before the gun went off. Afterwards, nobody could have read anything in her expression because there was none, only this sudden dishevelment of the bone structure.

It was an old-fashioned lecture theatre, with long, curved, narrow mahogany benches going the full width of the room, except for the aisles, and steeply tiered to the back, where there was another door. Geraldine slipped down under the bench after the initial shot and, from his spot behind the lectern at the front, Cameron could not see much of her, only the whiteness of a cricket sweater she had regu-

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larly appeared in lately, and the grey-streaked, fairish mass of her hair. The man with the pistol went to the aisle, stepped up two tiers, jumped onto the third bench, and walked a few steps along it, scattering the books and papers of the couple of students between the aisle and Geraldine. He stood over the place where she lay and aimed the gun at her again.

"No," Cameron yelled. "Why? Oh, why?" He moved out from behind the lectern, the copy of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle,* from which he had been reading to illustrate irony, still in his hand. The man turned and stared at him for a moment. Her husband? Geraldine was a mature student with sons, from one of whom she might have borrowed the sweater. Didn't Cameron recall drinking Chianti with this man at some social evening for students and partners in her first year? A plumber? A roofer? "Mr. Marques," he shouted, "you'll never get away with this. Why don't we just talk it over like two sensible people?"

The man turned back, then bent down as if to get a better sighting of Geraldine on the floor. She must have rolled partway under the seat. In a moment he did something very extraordinary, which to Cameron carried a kind of sparkling symbolism. The attacker actually kneeled on the third bench, his back to Cameron, the gun pointed down in front of him at Geraldine. The contradiction seemed to Cameron heavy with meaning—this traditional attitude of subjection, even supplication, yet also this attitude of terrible dominance. In his teaching he always stressed the suitability of crime as a novelistic subject, because of its multitudinous complexities: hence today's look at irony, for instance.

The man fired again, and soon Cameron glimpsed a large, spreading red rectangle appear on the shoulder and back of the cricket sweater. Again that seemed to him significant: this garment of a rigidly formulated, indeed venerable, game now touched by deep disorder. He could smell what he knew must be cordite, sharp, pleasant, lingering. The man straightened, then walked swiftly, assuredly, back along the bench towards the door. Yes, perhaps a roofer. He had on what looked to Cameron like remarkably expensive brown fashion boots, possibly even Timberland. Roofers made a bomb, and plumbers. But how absurd, he thought, to be noticing such things when a woman lay dead and the murderer was escaping. Yet the mind was ungovernable, following its own streams of consciousness, not exactly regardless of events, but only contingent to them. He would diary his reactions with exactitude.

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To his classes he had continually pointed out that action, action, and more action was the essence of crime writing: explicit philosophising, even character analysis, had to be brief, if not actually sketchy, in the interest of pace. Yearly he quoted to his pupils that saying of—or was it about?—Len Deighton, the spy author, stipulating that if a narrative grew slack, the way to recover was to have somebody barge through the door holding a gun. And now it had really happened—and yes, by God, it worked: the whole tempo of things had changed. This lecture theatre's atmosphere no longer seemed even vaguely comparable with what it was when he had been skillfully elaborating on the fierce irony in the title of George V. Higgins's *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*—where "friends" meant the reverse. No question, it had been a well-prepared and genuinely felt lecture of very bright insights, but certainly the students had reacted much more vividly to the interruption by the armed man and the shooting of Geraldine. In fact, they were still tense, still white or flushed, many of them, some weeping.

So, then, action. The only relevant contribution he could think of now was pursuit of the gunman, who had left the room by the upper door, slamming it behind him. Cameron raced up the tiered floor after him. "No!" an undergraduate cried. "My God, Professor, he's armed. Let the police deal with it."

Yet that was not how these things were shaped at all. If some innocent bystander is drawn in during a crime, he is drawn in and has no choice but to become involved, though fearful. This crisis was what in Hemingway—an occasional practitioner of crime fiction—would be called "the moment of truth," and one could only put one's manliness on the line and hope it was of due quality. Cameron still carried the paperback George V. Higgins novel. Would he throw this at the gunman should he encounter him now? It was a paradigm situation: the pathetically ill-armed, run-of-the-mill, even insignificant man—one of life's ordinary Joes—willing to confront the violent brute, and able to offer against this threat only a farcically negligible missile, plus, though, his courage, determination, and the blessed instinct of good's resistance to evil. He remembered Fredric March coping with Bogart and other hoodlums in *The Desperate Hours*. Somehow and eventually this good and typical figure always won: art's pressure towards tidiness ensured it. He felt wonderfully heartened as he ran, and considered it not foolhardy but obligatory to ignore the well-intentioned, frantic, yelled warning.

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Then, as Cameron neared the door, it was flung open again and the man stood there once more, his gun raised. Jesus, had all that rubbish stuff about Hemingway and blessed instincts knackered this narrative so badly that the technique of an armed intruder bursting through the door had to be given such an immediate second run? Cameron stopped, horrified, and they stared at each other. This was the instant, wasn't it, when a fictional character would think lovingly of all those precious things that constituted the texture of existence—bird song, children's laughter, a modicum of Turkish delight, Mozart and/or Randy Crawford, plus, of course, the clean smack of a ball hit perfectly into the pool pocket.

"Why? You ask why?" the man cried in a strangely hollow, yet at the same time immensely powerful, voice.

"Yes, why?" Cameron answered. There could be a remarkable strength from repetition in dialogue: the strength of incantation.

"I'll tell you why. Oh yes, I'll tell you why." Perhaps this man attended evening creative writing classes and also knew about incantation.

One of the more promising students shouted: "What we are seeing here is violence as an outcrop of fundamental psychological disturbance. Character blazoned in action."

"Come," Cameron replied, leading down towards the lectern. He turned his back on the gun, knowing somehow that this was a gesture which could not provoke a shot. It would have been hopelessly outside the mode. "We are a university and everyone is entitled to his point of view. Tell me, are you Mr. Marques? Did we not take wine together, sir, on some earlier occasion?" Often elaborate politeness darkened prevailing menace even further, by showing the formalities of society in peril and so indicating their extreme fragility.

"It doesn't matter who I am."

"But may I call you Mr. Marques?"

"Call me what you will. See me simply as someone with a mission. I have fulfilled half of it."

"Half?"

Cameron felt a terrible fear grip him. If this were fiction it would have been an example of that storytelling trick of not giving the reader too much too soon: standard in crime writing, where narrative flair was the art of holding back. Lord, what was the other half of the mission? *Who* was the other half? As to halves, for half of half a term in Geraldine's second year Cameron had been banging her three or four times a week, after which she moved on to, he

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thought, Graham Liatt in the History of Political Ideas. The kind of ferocious sexual guilt that waylaid the hero in both *Presumed Innocent* and *Fatal Attraction* ravaged Cameron for a moment, though the actual circumstances in those tales were very different, naturally.

Marques followed him down to the lectern. Cameron replaced *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* on it and addressed the class: "This is Geraldine's, well, husband. Was. We're often left without a full statement of the murderer's point of view. Perhaps we get excessively preoccupied with the restoration of legitimacy, the efficacy of the detective as agent of civic recuperation. Today this can be corrected. I don't know whether Mr. Marques will agree to take questions later."

Cameron could see Geraldine's body again, exactly as it had been, except that the red rectangle on the sweater had grown. The greyness in her hair had almost put him off that liaison in her second year, and had ensured that he did not grieve irreparably when, after a few weeks, she grew restless for Liatt, or some other teaching ram. Perhaps he should have forgone even that short affair. Regret, vain second thoughts, incomprehensibility at one's own actions—these were the essence of the grippingly dramatic. Watching her, inert, he realised she was what Martin Amis in his novel *London Fields* would rather jokingly call the murder—the passive figure, to whom something is done, namely death: it could be significant that the term was applied to a woman, the exploited sex—feminist critics might like to mull that. Geraldine's body bellowed body language.

"She was moving away from me, losing me," Marques declared. "That's why I am here."

"Geraldine was?" Cameron asked.

"And so I decided to bring her to rest. She is mine again now, only mine, forever mine. Reclaimed at last." Passionately, his voice rose to even greater force, easily reaching people in the back row, with which Cameron himself sometimes had difficulty, and Marques lifted both hands in a kind of agonised yet victorious declaration.

He had placed the pistol on the copy of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* on the lectern, within a couple of metres of Cameron. While Marques was stretching like that it might have been possible to snatch the gun. This did not seem at all the proper way things should go, though. Instead, there ought to come a moment—a moment when all the talking had been done, all the explanations covered, all the overtones and wider issues hinted at—when Marques would volun-

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tarily surrender the weapon in a telling gesture and Cameron would shake his hand, look once more squarely into his eyes, seeing only agony and loneliness there, and then take him regretfully but unswervingly to justice. It was important to round off matters, hit a note of tragedy rather than of banal force majeure. This kind of touch was what produced resonances, lifted even brutal crime to a significant plane.

In any case, Cameron was not sure he would be able to manage the automatic usefully even if he did grab it. It was of dark blue metal, horribly like the tint of a bruise, Cameron thought—upsettingly so, disablingly so. But how wimpish a reaction! Was this a sign of the essential impotence of the scholar and academic as against the Man of Action—the Man of Action whom scholars and academics battened on: historians with Attila or Wellington or Rommel; himself—Cameron—in this particular course, with murderers, bank robbers, roofers?

"How do you mean she's yours again now, only yours, forever yours?" Kate Bilton called from the end of the back row. "How can she be yours only yours? She's stone dead. This is surely sloppy thinking. She's not anyone's now. Blast someone's skull to establish possession? A bit roundabout, wouldn't you say?"

This kid Bilton had always suffered from a foul dose of literalism. Why she was doing an English course at all Cameron found it hard to tell. Realising he had to say something to help Marques out of his probably limited articulation, Cameron replied: "Death can supply a kind of resolution, surely, Kate. It has its own awful, majestic neatness. Take the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*—painful, yes, and yet in its oblique way triumphant."

"Oh, that's Emily Dickinson–type crap," Bilton said. "What we've got here is a middle-aged, tireless shagger-around lying broken up on the floor of room B117, knocked over by a husband scared of scandal, AIDS, pox, and performance comparisons. End of story."

Oh, how wrong she could be, with her rough, youthful common sense! The end of Geraldine, certainly, but not at all end of story.

"Moving away from you?" Cameron asked him. "Do you mean socially and educationally through her degree course here? Believe me, I do understand. This is a theme in so much bitter and fierce crime: the class battle localised in some terrible, emblematic love dispute. Her new cultural acquisitions—literature, scansion, critical theory, familiarity with the *Faerie Queen*—made you feel excluded and uncontrollably envious, yes? Shut out? I see. Social class—the

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root of almost all major conflict in the British novel, including the crime novel. Its motivating power not always easy to grasp for those in foreign cultures—the U.S.A. or Japan—yet so vital, for all that." Cameron turned sympathetically to him. "Yet being a roofer is a fine and noble trade, Mr. Marques, not to say indispensable." Then, after a moment, Cameron switched back to the undergraduates and gave a small, apologetic smile. "But, of course, you will have spotted that even as I enunciate this I sound patronising, false, a slave of that very concept of social class. I don't even know this man's first name. Mr. Marques. That form of address indicates I am addressing a mere artisan."

"Roofer? Who's a fucking roofer?" Marques replied. "I'm in the Foreign Office, passed out second in Great Britain."

That use of the expletive really intrigued Cameron. He always gave two full lecture hours to the function of swearing in crime fiction. So often it could be used to compromise and amend the very class categorisations they were discussing here now, bringing magnificent ambiguity. It was exactly right for Marques to employ that demotic, briskly consonantal term when, at the same time, he was announcing himself virtually part of the establishment through his work and his, clearly, first-class intellect. Of course, the word had lost a good deal of its impact now through widespread use in prose of all genres. In the States, as Cameron told his classes, it had been necessary to augment its power a little by adding "mother": "a motherfucking roofer?" might have had an extra punch about it, and created yet more fascinating uncertainties of the social ranking of the speaker.

"Moving away from you in which sense then?" Cameron asked.

"I couldn't satisfy her any longer."

Cameron immediately felt easier. He had failed to satisfy Geraldine Marques also, so if this was a jealousy job, her husband's rage should not fall on him. In fact, Geraldine had advised Cameron to try sex therapy, or some cock-specialising pseudo witch doctor she knew in one of the city's mean, multiracial, ghetto streets where a man might go who was not himself mean but who could not get it—or keep it—up. That standard weight of guilt was lifted and he no longer even vaguely thought of snatching the gun for self-protection. Was Marques after Liatt then? This was the second half of the mission? Cameron had heard Graham gave women as good as he got, in the current phrase, and then a bit more. Two girls in this class spoke rapturously of him, including the formidable Bilton.

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Had Geraldine told Marques of Liatt? His extermination was to come next? Among the political ideas Liatt taught, he favoured radical, old-fashioned Toryism and wooed women with a mixture of haughty surliness and extravagant charm. The best eternal triangle plots always had some thematic, possibly stylistic, aspects, as well as the mere clash of rival lusts, and perhaps Marques was Social Democrat or even Labour. Then again, the sound of his surname—did it have yet further ambiguities: Marques, Marx? That also would distance him from Liatt. This could be altogether a marvellously layered situation.

Cameron wondered whether he should try to get a warning to Graham Liatt that he was about to have at least his face shot off and maybe worse. Yet there was a kind of unfolding inevitability about the way things were moving this afternoon. He felt it would be the behaviour of a philistine, even a vandal, to interfere. Matters had to take their sombre course, hadn't they?

And then the upper-lecture-theatre door was flung open again. A man stood there. "Him!" Marques cried, in obvious, appalled recognition and anger.

It was not Liatt, but Albert Quant of French, bald, stooped, wet-nosed, filthy-jacketed, stained-trousered, greasy-breathed, loud-shirted, cheap-sandalled, who should have gone through early retirement years ago, but who somehow hung on and on and was now almost too late for late retirement. Alby (Froggy-boy) Quant? It seemed unbelievable that he should have been giving it to Geraldine, or anyone else postwar. Alby, not Liatt, was the second half of the mission?

"I heard you were in the building," Albert remarked, in that hesitant way he always affected, the sod, pretending that English was unnatural to him because of his deep immersion in the cross-Channel parlance. "I am here."

"Bursting through the door like that. So, where's your bloody pistol?" Cameron asked.

"You told Geraldine she deserved to live among gods because she was so lovely," Marques cried. "Where did that leave me, even though I spent hundreds on these boots she admired?"

"I taught her the works of de Musset," Quant replied. "That is true. She seemed impressed by certain poems." He fell into that creepy, lopsided, reciting stance which could clear the senior common room. "One work in particular impressed her. It begins, *Regrettez-vous le temps?* I'll translate, shall I, very loosely, and I'll

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telescope? We enjoyed together those lines, Geraldine and I. They go like this: *Do you regret having missed that past period when the classical gods descended and inhabited this very earth? Our trouble is that we have come too late, you and I, into a world that is too old.*"

Marques cried: "That's it! She told me I was no use to her any longer, because I was of a hopelessly faded era. Damn it, she had come to regard you as a kind of supreme god—Zeus himself, for God's sake, as it were."

Alby dealt fingerwise with a string of snot that swung suddenly from one nostril. "I'm afraid this enhancement of my identity does happen now and then with women when we're into de Musset," he replied. "Especially mature women students. I don't encourage it."

"She said she had come to imagine you as a great, beautiful, thudding-winged swan," Marques complained. "Took the kids' white sweaters to mock up appropriate plumage and improve her attractiveness."

"As a swan Zeus did get it very effectively and significantly away on Leda," Quant replied. "I'm sure you know that. Yes, that was an example of when a god did indeed come on earth."

Cameron was delighted. "Oh, this is a murder with a definite classical flavour and, thus, right in the central British tradition. So many of our most distinguished crime-mystery stories are aimed at those with a thorough public school and Oxbridge humanities training. These books are intended, as the phrase goes, I think, for the fine mind momentarily at leisure, e.g., works by Dorothy L. Sayers. Classical, Biblical, archaeological references may abound, bringing a brilliant richness."

Marques reached out for the pistol, then replaced it on the lectern, as if the thought of doing Quant, with his special status, was preposterous, especially from a distance of more than thirty metres and up the slope.

"You must flee now," Quant remarked.

"No," Cameron said, aghast. "Things have surely come full circle. It is the juncture for retribution, for surrender, for completeness."

"Those considerations are the banalities of a merely terrestrial, law-and-order-obsessed, sickeningly tit-for-tat-orientated society. Go, Marques. Go now," Quant cried. "Run free, follow your impulses, as did the glorious gods of old."

"I do not deny the classics, Albert," Cameron replied, "and in fact I embrace one of their prime concepts: catharsis—the purging, the sacrifice. This now is due. This is the necessary culmination."

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"Balls," Quant remarked.

Kate Bilton, looking from the lecture theatre window, said: "Too late, anyway. Our friends the cops are here, with flak jackets and dogs—using the term 'friends' ironically, of course. The porter must have been on the phone, hearing the shots. Marques is never going to get out."

"This just had to be the final chapter," Cameron said sadly, yet with satisfaction, gingerly confiscating the pistol. Then he leant forward to shake hands formally, meaningfully, almost mournfully with Marques. As he did so, some inadvertent pressure was applied to the trigger of the gun in his other hand and it went off. Marques fell. Dying, he gasped: "I am truly with her forever now." To Cameron, decorum seemed admirably present in this flourish of reconciliatory rhetoric. Blood welled.

"Christ, doesn't he spout, though?" Bilton said.●

"I knew my CD had a substantial penalty for early withdrawal but . . ."

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A former Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee and an author whose stories regularly find publication in the United States and Germany as well as Britain, Northern Ireland's Jo Bannister has a number of novels available in the United States from Doubleday . . .

LAST OF KIN

by JO BANNISTER

At the mention of the words "sweet little old lady," everyone who knew her immediately thought of Mrs. Nancy Budgens. Even people who didn't know her got a mind's-eye view of someone very *like* Nancy: someone of about seventy with a soft powdery complexion, fluffy peach-white hair, faded but still warm blue eyes, no great height, and nothing you could call a waist without setting off a lie detector. They pictured the way she smiled, the blue eyes disappearing in a mass of crinkles pushed up by the apple cheeks, and the way she walked, with a slight roll like a deep-sea sailor. They knew her wardrobe consisted almost entirely of flower-printed cotton dresses.

Asked to speculate further, they would have attributed to this archetypal Little Old Lady a large close-knit family of equally apple-cheeked husband, children, grandchildren, and, quite possibly, great-grandchildren as well. It seemed somehow part of the package, that such a plainly maternal figure should come with all the trimmings.

But in fact Nancy Budgens did not have the perfect family life which would have completed the picture. Mr. Budgens, branch manager of a local bank for twenty years, died at his desk just weeks short of retirement. Their daughter Sandra never married, though she did raise a child. A dull woman, prematurely middle-aged, she seemed content in her undemanding job as an assistant librarian; until one morning she was found hanging from a length of picture cord attached to the specially high shelf for books of a certain artistic nature.

Which reduced the already small family to just two: Nancy and her grandson Trevor. When anyone asked, she would put on that

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brave smile patented by little old ladies and say, "Trevor's all I have left." Then: "And I'm all he has."

This led some of her friends to suppose the relationship closer than in fact it was. Although alone, Sandra Budgens had managed to provide a home and a decent upbringing for her son without recourse to her parents. Young Trevor saw as much of his Grandma and Grandad as most boys—occasional holidays, birthdays, Christmas—and no more. There was an element of wishful thinking in what Nancy said. Though they were indeed next of kin after Sandra's sad, meaningless departure, she and Trevor remained more amiable than close.

For one thing, Trevor wasn't Reliable. As the widow of a bank manager Nancy put a lot of stock in Reliability, which she judged by such things as having a Proper Job and a Nice Home and Nice Friends. Trevor disappointed on every count. He was an actor. He said he was quite a good one and made a decent living. All Nancy knew was that he visited her at times when people with Proper Jobs would be working, and he wore clothes she wouldn't have let Mr. Budgens put in their own dustbin. He shared a run-down Victorian house with several other Thespians of both traditional sexes and one or two others.

In spite of that, he seemed a kind young man. He brought her chocolates on her birthday, and flowers for no particular reason, and phoned her at intervals to check that she was keeping well.

And she was keeping well; but she was aware of the passing of time and the need to make proper provision for her old age. The family home, which had never felt a burden until recently, seemed to be getting bigger, the stairs steeper, the bathroom further down the landing with every month that passed. Once it had been her ambition to die in this house; now that seemed less a hope than a sentence. She thought there must be easier ways for an old lady with a little money to spend her last years.

She asked Trevor round to discuss the situation. He came willingly enough, but was puzzled, as if she'd asked for his advice on gerbils. All he knew about money was that if you didn't pay what you owed, people came after you with pick-axe handles.

"I'm not a wealthy woman," Nancy began coyly. "Your grandfather, God bless him, left me comfortable, but that's getting to be a long time ago. Running this house has eaten into what he left. Then there was the inflation, and the recession . . ." She smiled apologetically.

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Trevor glanced around him. It wasn't a big house, but it was a considerable asset. He couldn't believe she was desperate enough to be asking him for money. "Grandma, of course I'd help if I could. But—"

But when Trevor said he was successful he meant he could live on what he earned as an actor, didn't have to work in kitchens when he was "resting." It did not mean he had a numbered account in Switzerland that the Inland Revenue knew nothing about. His mother's estate had boiled down to a few thousand pounds in a Building Society, which he considered his insurance against destitution if the roles he specialised in—petty criminals, undesirable boy friends, and assorted Shakespearian gravediggers and sword-carriers whose first names were always Second—dried up. His only other assets were an elderly van—his ability to transport scenery had won him several parts—and a fifth share in a house that grew mushrooms.

Oh yes: and an elderly grandmother with a much nicer house of her own and no other relatives.

Nancy patted his hand absently. "Would you, dear? Bless you. But that's not quite what I had in mind.

"You and I are one another's only family, Trevor. When I die, what I have will naturally be yours. I've always hoped it would be enough to provide you with a little security.

"But if I do what I have in mind, there won't be as much left as I'd like. I'm an old lady now, but I could live another twenty years. And nice residential accommodation doesn't come cheap. I'd have to sell this house and buy an annuity. On the credit side"—Nancy wasn't a bank manager's widow for nothing—"I'd never be a burden to you. On the debit side, there mightn't be much left for *your* old age. Before I burn any boats, I'd like to know how you feel about that. Would it be a major blow?"

Trevor had never given it much thought. He knew he was his grandmother's only heir, anticipated benefiting at some point, but he'd never worked out how much he could expect, let alone how to use it. He thought about it now.

She was seventy-one: no great age by today's standards. She was fit, she had no history of illness—she might live to be a hundred. He'd be in his fifties then. There were an awful lot of fifty-year-old actors for whom "resting" had become a permanent state of affairs. Whatever the house was worth, whatever she got for the antiques that furnished it, and whatever remained from his grandfather's

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investments, it would all be gone by then. Even if she didn't live to be a hundred; even if she only lived another ten years, say, which was nothing. Every week she would reduce his expectations by hundreds of pounds.

The mere fact that he wasn't able to brush if off unconsidered, with a gallant smile and a casual "Grandma, it's your money, use it how you want," told Nancy that however well he was doing in his own terms, her grandson did not have the kind of financial reserves beside which her own paled to insignificance.

"Oh dear," she said anxiously, reaching for his hand, "it *would*, wouldn't it? You've been counting on it. You're a good boy, you've never asked me for money, even when you couldn't possibly have had enough. And now I'm proposing to spend your inheritance. No, it really won't do—I shall have to think again."

Trevor got a belated grip on his expression and clasped her hand in return. "Don't be silly, Grandma," he said. "It's your money—Grandad made it and he'd want you to use it in your best interests. Spend it and enjoy it. I've some money of my own: not a fortune but enough to see me through the odd sticky patch. Mum left me nearly ten thousand, and I've added a bit to it since I've been working. And hell, I'm only twenty-five: if I can't put together a comfortable stake over the next forty years I should have been a greengrocer instead! Now, tell me about your plans. Is there somewhere you've got your eye on?"

Nancy's face lit up with pleasure. If it was true that Sandra had never fulfilled the highest potential as a daughter, that she and her mother had in fact fount it hard to like one another, she had at least raised a son to be proud of. "Trevor, you're a lovely lad." Nancy got up and bustled over to her bureau, coming back with a sheaf of envelopes made of expensively grained paper. "Yes, I have. I've been doing a bit of research, and there's a couple of wonderful places."

She spread the brochures in front of him, pointing out the lifts, the en-suite bathrooms, the extensive gardens with the enthusiasm of a child comparing holiday-camps.

"I think Rosedale's the one I shall go for. Look at those *lovely* flowerbeds! And if you pay a little more for a room on this side of the house"—she tapped the illustration with a fingernail—"there's a view of the river. Oh, I did used to love the river when we were younger! I really think it would be worth spending a little more to be able to enjoy it again."

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"What's this one?" asked Trevor, holding up a well-thumbed prospectus with a lot of gold leaf on the cover.

Nancy's voice went school-girl breathy. "The Beeches. The Rolls Royce of residential provision for the elderly—the sort of place you only get sent if the family feel really guilty about the way they've treated you. I wish someone had treated *me* that badly! Even by selling this place I couldn't meet the fees at The Beeches." She smiled cheerily. "Still, it's nice to dream."

"'Course it is, Gran," Trevor said bravely, well aware that her dreams were putting the boot into his. Even if he'd never thought of it in those terms, this house had been his insurance against having to play comic footmen in pantomime in Huddersfield. When it was gone, he was on his own. Her news had given him much to think about.

As his had given Nancy. But they parted on the doorstep with their customary brief hug as if all was well.

"You are a *nice* boy, Trevor," his grandmother said again. "I've been quite worried, I don't mind saying. I'm glad we've had this talk."

"There's nothing to worry about," Trevor said firmly. "Like you always say, all we've got is each other. If we don't look out for one another, who else will?"

Normally, they met every month or so. But there were practicalities to discuss, so there was nothing odd about them going for a drive in Trevor's van just three days later. The inquest heard that it was Trevor's suggestion but that Nancy jumped at the idea.

They drove down to the river and parked where they could just see the roofs of the Rosedale Retirement Home across the municipal playing fields. "It's a nice area," said Trevor.

"Yes, it is pretty," agreed Nancy. "Not that I'll be able to walk this far, but it'll be nice to look at from the bedroom window. That's the advantage with the Beeches, you see." She turned and indicated the butter-coloured stone of a large house surrounded by tree-studded lawns that rolled down to the water's edge a quarter of a mile upstream. "No walking—it's an actual riverside property."

"I'd have thought that was a drawback for a retirement home. Don't the old dears keep sliding in?"

Nancy smiled. "There's a chicken-wire fence to catch them. I don't think they lose many."

Trevor grinned. "You and Grandad had a boat on the river, didn't you?" She nodded. "Mum used to try and make me come out with

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you sometimes: she said the fresh air would do me good. But I never did like being that close to water."

"I remember," murmured Nancy. "When your Grandad tried teaching you to swim you screamed so much he had to give up. Such a pity."

Trevor shrugged. "There are worse handicaps for an actor. The only time it gives me a problem is in *The Tempest.*

Nancy chuckled. "You must favour your father's side. I can't think how a grandson of mine could *not* love the river. It's *beautiful.*"

A man walking his dog along the far bank saw what happened next. The van doors opened and a young man and an elderly lady got out and strolled along the bank a few feet from the water, a brown torrent swollen by months of rain. As they walked, the woman gestured up and down stream as if pointing out items of interest. Then they turned back to the van.

In doing so the old lady lost her footing on the rain-softened bank and fell with a startled squawk first to her knees and then, as she struggled to get up, down the muddy slope into the river. At once the young man threw himself full length on the bank in an effort to reach her. But her hand remained tantalisingly beyond his grasp. After only a brief hesitation, he kicked off his shoes and slithered down the muddy bank into the water.

The witness was unable to say quite what followed. Poor Mr. Budgens reached his struggling grandmother and grasped her hand. But then either he lost his footing, or in her panic she unbalanced him, and he disappeared under the roiling flood. He surfaced yards out into the river, where even in normal weather there was depth enough for quite big boats, and yelled and waved his arms over his head until he disappeared again. Twice more he floundered to the surface, further from the bank each time, while the witness watched in helpless horror. After that, he did not see him again.

By then help had reached Mrs. Budgens. Strong arms pulled her up the bank, wrapped coats and car rugs around her, chaffed her trembling hands. All she could say was, "Trevor. Where's Trevor? Where's Trevor?"

The inquest was a formality. Death by misadventure, and an eloquent tribute from the coroner for a courageous young man who braved an element he feared deeply in an attempt to rescue a frail old lady. It was the stuff of tabloid headlines, and Nancy Budgens was touched by the kindness paid by so many people who never knew him to poor Trevor's memory.

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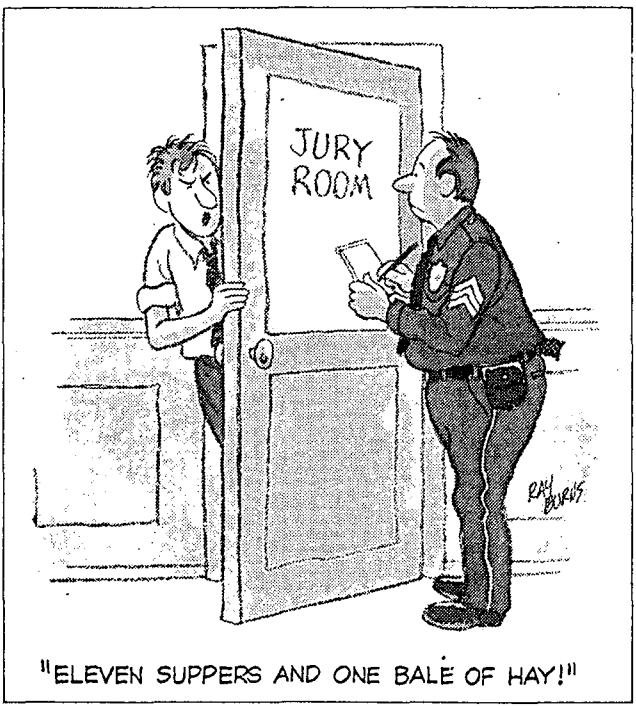
When it was all done, no one was surprised that Nancy sold her house and used the proceeds to move into residential accommodation. There were a few raised eyebrows that she chose a home so close to the scene of the tragedy. But as she pointed out, she had always loved the river; and in a sort of a way, there was something of Trevor in it now. Perhaps it was odd of her. Bereaved elderly ladies of seventy-one were entitled to be odd.

So she moved into The Beeches. It was worth every penny it cost. With poor Trevor gone, there was no one left to consider but herself, so she spent the money with a clear conscience. Together, the proceeds of her house and Trevor's building society bought an annuity that would keep her in the state to which she meant to become accustomed for as long as she lived. It was, after all, what Trevor would have wished.

Trevor had been her last surviving blood-relation, her only heir. And she had been his. ●



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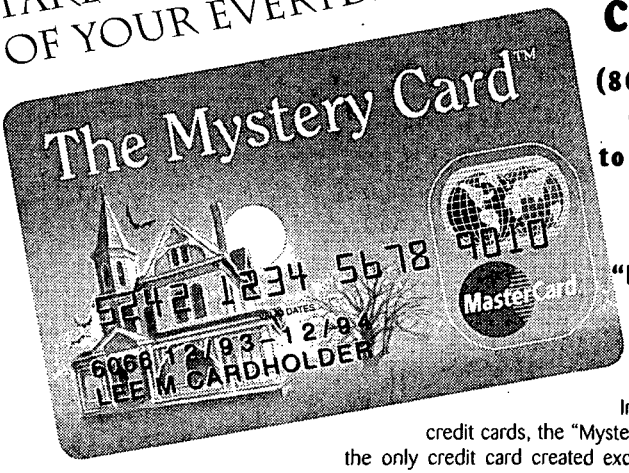

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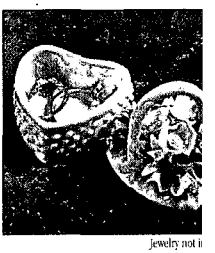

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